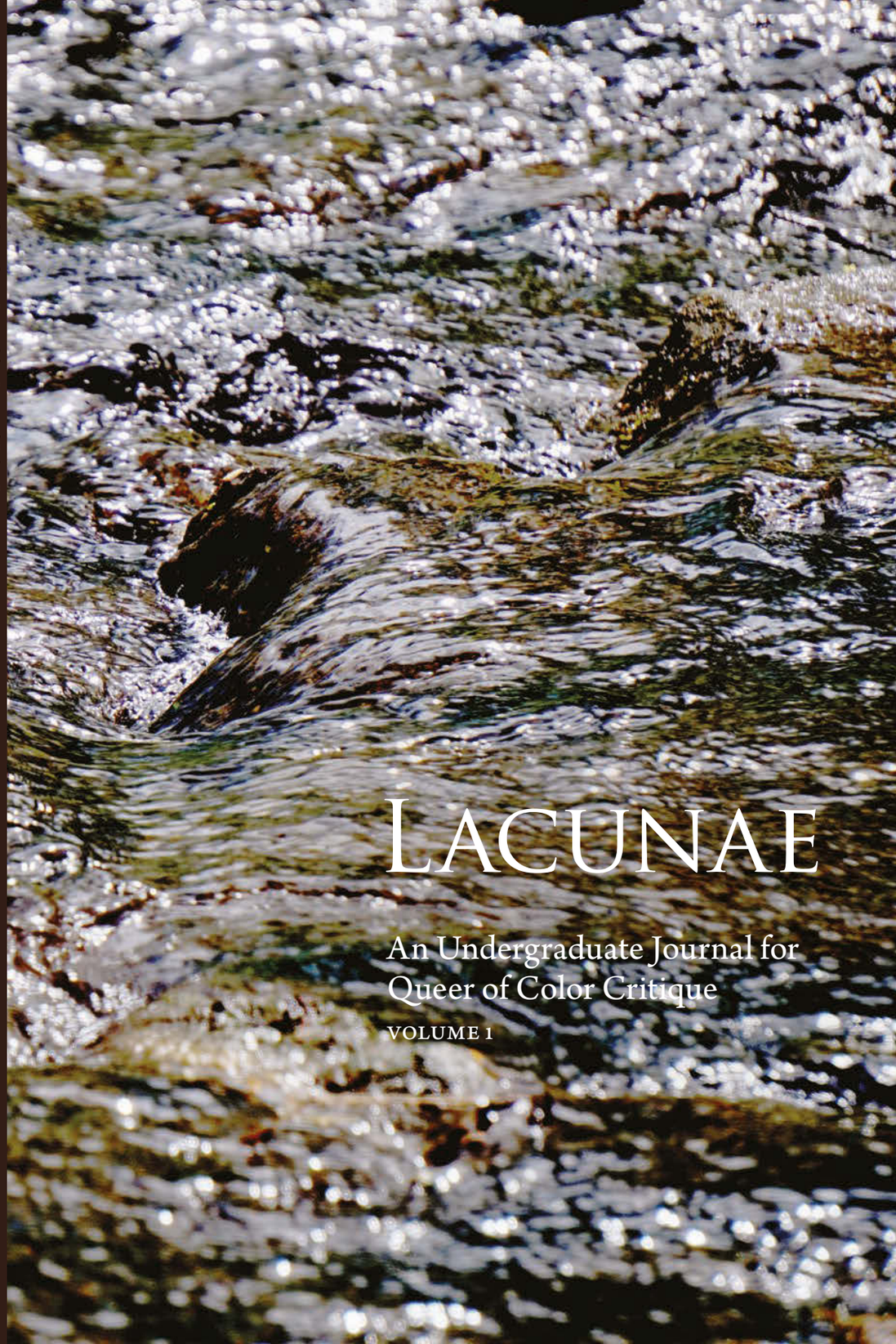
LACUNAE • An Undergraduate Journal for Queer of Color Critique

VOLUME 1 • MAY 2018



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"My Own Kind":
The Politics of Naming in Queer and Trans Communities of Color

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Lacunae Volume 1 • May 2018
pages.vassar.edu/lacunaejournal

Edited by Spencer Garcia
Cover art by Micah Fedenko

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Acknowledgments

Spencer Garcia

To my advisor, Professor Hiram Pérez,
for his courses on Queer of Color Critique, his immense support throughout this two-year project, and his strong impact on my personal and intellectual growth at Vassar.

To Professor Light Carruyo,
for her continued support of my academic work, and me, from my first-year writing seminar to one of my last classes (and beyond).

To Professor Carlos Alamo,
for helping me to start the writing of my article, teaching me about the history of our people, and letting me cry in his office.

To Professor Colette Cann,
for her amazing scheduling skills and her ability to always see my potential (even when I couldn't).

To Professor Molly McGlennen,
for her Native American Studies classes, which have been fundamental to my understandings of Indigeneity and colonization.

To Luis Inoa,
for his mentorship, love, and care throughout my time at Vassar, and for the beautiful, ongoing conversations we've had about gender.

To Micah Fedenko, Matt Ford, Donna Gary, Rishi Guné,
Stevie Gunter, Giselle Sanchez Huerta, and Jennifer Vela,
for their powerful contributions to this journal, their hard work and patience throughout this process, and for dealing with all of my emails.

To the bois of color I interviewed,
for their political work, their community, and for sharing their stories with me.

To Ri Le,
for designing the publication of *Lacunae* and bringing the journal to life.

To the Vassar College ALANA Center and the Office of the Dean of Studies,
for their support of *Lacunae* and their funding of the publication.

To my ancestors, for their resistance and for making my existence possible.

To my chosen family, for *everything*.

Thank you.

Mission Statement

Spencer Garcia

Lacunae: An Undergraduate Journal for Queer of Color Critique interrupts the field of Queer Studies and challenges its silence around racism, nationalism, and colonialism through the centering of women of color feminisms and critiques of (hetero) normativity. Queer of Color Critique acts as an intervention in and expansion of Queer Studies by interrogating "queerness" beyond the realm of gender and sexuality to establish "queer" as an analytic and anti-racist praxis. Drawing from queer of color critique and women of color feminisms as theoretical frameworks and modes of existence, *Lacunae* demonstrates the multiplicity of queer of color theories, activisms, and arts that manifest within, outside of, and against the academy. The journal centers inter-, trans-, and anti-disciplinary theory, art, and praxis, and welcomes contributions such as traditional essays, research articles, and creative works from queer and trans undergraduate students of color. *Lacunae* addresses the lack of "academic" journals dedicated to the field of Queer of Color Critique, celebrates the lives of queer and trans people of color, and prioritizes the publication of queer of color scholarly and artistic expressions.

Editor's Note

Spencer Garcia

rev·o·lu·tion·ar·y
ˌrevəˈlo͞oSHəˌnerē
Adjective

1. involving or causing a complete or dramatic change.
   "a revolutionary new drug"
   synonyms: thoroughgoing, thorough, complete, total, absolute, utter, comprehensive, sweeping, far-reaching, extensive, profound

2. engaged in or promoting political revolution.
   "the revolutionary army"
   synonyms: rebellious, rebel, insurgent, rioting, mutinous, renegade, insurrectionary, insurrectionist, seditious, subversive, extremist

— Google search for "define: revolutionary"

Lacunae: An Undergraduate Journal for Queer of Color Critique is truly revolutionary. To my knowledge, *Lacunae* is the only "academic" journal in existence dedicated to the publication and celebration of Queer of Color Critique, queer and trans undergraduate students of color, and queer of color theory, art, and praxis. The title of this journal, "*Lacunae*," refers to the current and historical unfilled spaces inside and outside of the academy for the celebration of the lives and epistemologies of queer and trans people of color. Therefore, *Lacunae* causes a "complete and dramatic change" in the fields of Queer Studies and Queer of Color Critique (among others) through its publication of historically unheard and un(der)valued voices. Further, this journal, its contents, and its contributors are inherently political due to their existence in a world that continues to suppress, silence, and enact violence upon them. There are many people who do not wish to see this journal published, who believe that centering queer and trans people of color is "exclusionary," and who do not understand the urgent need for this theory, art, and praxis to be shared inside and outside of the academy. It is my hope that *Lacunae* sets a precedent in increasing the publication of queer of color epistemologies in all forms, and in expanding the number of spaces inside, outside, and against the academy where queer and trans people of color are celebrated, appreciated, and loved. It is my hope that a revolution starts here.

Transformative Engagement with Hegemonic Masculinity

Micah Fedenko

Abstract
This paper will celebrate how some queer and/or trans Black and brown people who have been assigned female at birth challenge hegemonic demarcations of gender that only entertain white, bio-essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. Even in academic texts that attempt to expand those definitions (like Jack Halberstam's Female Masculinity), whiteness is the default, and the destabilization of oppositional gender categories by Black and brown queer and trans people is largely ignored. This erasure is especially concerning when one recognizes that Black and brown people who are deemed "female" have been excluded from a white definition of womanhood for centuries, and have historically challenged normative gender definitions by reappropriating the racialized masculinities that were imposed onto them. Indeed, many queer and/or trans Black and brown people labeled "female" have transformed their ostracization from white gender normativities into opportunities for self-identification with redefined masculinities that do not necessitate debasement of the feminine. In this paper, I will feature contemporary collectives like bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project that are significant actors in reshaping conceptions of gender for a more fluid and equitable dynamic between masculinity and femininity.

keywords: Black, masculinity, gender binary, self-identification, queer

Clarification of Terms

Before I begin, I feel compelled to contextualize my linguistic choices in a paper that examines the intricacies of self-identification. For instance, the labels "assigned female at birth" and "people of color" attempt to categorize people with the intent to convey information about them, but in reality they evoke a multiplicity of connotations within different circles. Therefore, I wish to clarify how I understand and interact with them from my perspective, as someone who has identified with both terms. Throughout this essay, I use the term "assigned female at birth" in an attempt to contextualize peoples' positionalities in relation to the sex that medical institutions have imposed on them. For me, the phrase emphasizes the need for a distinction between those who identify as women (including

our trans sisters) versus those who have been defaulted into a proximity to womanhood on the basis of genitalia deemed "female." I also understand that the phrase can also be problematized since it groups togethers all sorts of people (whose identities range from women, to non-binary, intersex, transmasculine, agender, etc.) on the basis of legally imposed bio-essentialist judgements of people's genitalia.

The phrase "people of color" also needs to to be contextualized since it is typically used as an umbrella term for anyone who is not white (e.g. Black people, non-white Latinx people, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders). To use the term is to imply solidarity on the basis of race. Consequently, "people of color" has the effect of foregrounding race as a marker of difference, and thus overlooks other statuses (like class) that inform one's positionality. The term also fails to engage with the fact that racial formation is very different in the United States compared to other countries and regions (for example, the one-drop rule).[1] Now, having prefaced the paper with these brief attempts at contextualizing my usage of the terms, I urge the reader to hold space for the limitations of and possibilities within the current language regarding racial and gender-based categorizations.

Introduction

In recent years, the word "queer" has been reclaimed in an attempt to appreciate rather than deride people with non-normative sexualities and genders. However, much of the modern usage of the term does not acknowledge that norms pertaining to gender and sexuality also incorporate white, classist ideals. As a result, it is impossible for Black and brown individuals to ever truly embody gender definitions that are historically rooted in the exclusion of non-white peoples. The "othering" of Black and brown people has produced opportunities for their subversion of the gender binary because they exist outside the power structures that endorse it. Thus, any conversations concerning queerness and/or examinations of social norms must incorporate the collusion between whiteness and dominant gender roles as we know them.

Historical Intertwinement of White Supremacy, Capitalism, and the Patriarchy

The forced migration and enslavement of an estimated 388,000 African people was integral to the budding economies of the North American colonies and the social identity of race was created to rationalize the subjugation and torture of those deemed slaves. A racial hierarchy was enforced that positioned "white" fair-skinned Europeans above and in opposition to the "black" dark-skinned Africans. Enslaved Black people were denied their personhood after being legally declared property, "a classification that was integral to the United States' capitalist economy" since it rationalized the dehumanization and exploitation of Black bodies (Beckhart and Rockman). The deep repercussions of slavery in America have resulted

in the historical and contemporary exclusion of Black and brown people from white normativities.

Masculinization of Black Women

In the antebellum South, for instance, Black women were refused access to the "cult of true womanhood" that dictated "the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women" (Carby 23). According to those standards, true women were characterized by exclusionary traits that only wealthy white women could claim because of their proximity to (and dependency) on white men. "Fragility was valorized as the ideal state of women" and yet it was a quality that slaves assigned female at birth could not afford to embody since "physical strength was necessary for the survival of women in the cotton fields" (Carby 25). Their denied access to femininity made it impossible for them to ever meet the standards normalized for the white women who deferred to their husbands but still lauded power over Black people. Indeed, the restrictive criteria for who is allowed to embody masculinity and femininity "is a tool of colonialism" that has been imposed onto people of color to judge them by white standards (binohan 122). A proximity to whiteness correlates with societal advantages in how one is perceived and what resources one has access to. Thus, the defaulting of whiteness in the hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity simultaneously stabilizes the gender binary and the racial hierarchy by incentivizing people to embrace gender roles rooted in whiteness.

But because these roles are exclusive, it is impossible for Black women to ever attain membership since they were masculinzed on the basis of their race. Although masculinity is privileged in the patriarchy, it was attributed to Black women with the purpose of distancing them from the non-productive lifestyle characteristic of white women who were the "Angel[s] in the House" (Showalter 207). Masculinity was attributed to Black women in an attempt to emphasize their racial identity over their gender identity, the rationale being that they were Black first and foremost, and therefore could be exploited without regard for the gender norms that were relevant to white society. That exploitation was manifested in the determination of "their labor [as] profoundly flexible" since they could fulfill different gendered duties (Haley 159). Black women could serve in the fields as well as attend to domestic needs within the slavemaster's house. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, American institutions continued to masculinize Black women during the Reconstruction Period by forcing them into chain gangs as punishment for violating vagrancy laws. The intent behind the refusal to incorporate Black women into the feminine normative was to validate their societal and institutional abasement in the name of monetary profit. The devaluation of Blackness however, has always been marked by Black queer resilience.

Exclusionary White Queerness

The term queer signifies a variety of connotations depending on the context that one draws upon. Its usage has shifted throughout the years from being a synonym for "strange," to signifying homosexuality amongst insider circles, and then being weaponized into a homophobic slur. Since then, in recent decades, there has been a reclamation of its usage, and within a contemporary context, it has been popularized to represent "a site of indeterminate possibility" where non-normative sexualities and genders can be claimed with language that is potentially all-encompassing in its ambiguity (Johnson 129). Increasing self-identification with queerness and its supposed signification of inclusivity must be questioned, especially with consideration of the fact that those who subvert cis-heteronormativity do not necessarily dissent with or recognize the oppressiveness of other norms. For many lesbian, gay, and transgender people of color, the word queer is "fraught with unposed assumptions which inhibit the radical potential of this category," with those assumptions relating to the word's usage in white spaces where factors other than gender or sexuality are ignored (Cohen 451). Even amongst white LGBTQ+ individuals who do not explicitly use that term, there is still complicity in the enforcement of other norms relating to race, class, and ability.

For instance, in Female Masculinity, Jack Halberstam attempts to engage with masculinity "where and when it leaves the white-male middle class body," but his analyses are overwhelmingly specific to the realm of whiteness (Halberstam 2). He acknowledges that only well-off white men are incorporated into examinations of masculinity but then focuses almost solely on white women with only sparse and additive references to "minority masculinities" (Halberstam 20). He writes that "black or Latina female masculinity may be a site within which dominant modes of power can be resignified with subversive and even potentially revolutionary results" but then neglects to wholeheartedly engage with the development of alternative, more expansive gender norms by people of color (Halberstam 29). The problematic aspects of Halberstam's work serve as symptoms of the pervasiveness of whiteness and its ability to exist as the default experience, especially within queer spaces.

Black Queer Redefinition of Masculinity

Despite "queer's" extensive usage amongst white people currently, the Black community has a powerful claim to that identity, especially when considering how normativity is defined and stabilized via multiple systems of oppression. Black people's longstanding association with queerness is also bolstered by the fact that during the post-Reconstruction era, "'queer' was most consistently used in Atlanta's mainstream press to describe perverse black bodies, ideas, and behaviors" (Haley 40). There is clear historical documentation of the criminalization of Black bodies as a result of their classification as queer, and the link between queerness and the racialized, criminal "other" remains strong today. As succinctly captured in the

article "My gender is Black," "Blackness is that which is denied access to humanity, and thus Blackness is denied access to human gender/sexuality identities" (Ziyad). The continued dehumanization of Black people within Western society refuses them the ability to embody mainstream expectations for gender and sexuality and so they exist outside the power structures that mandate whiteness in its notions of gender. The quality of "other" that is linked to Blackness does not make the Black identity inherently queer, but instead provides Black people who acknowledge their political, non-conformist identity (typically in relation to gender or sexuality) with valuable insight regarding critical examinations of societal norms. Those who have been racialized as "brown" or "of color" are similarly rejected from whiteness and their outsider status also encourages multifaceted examinations of norms.

As seen in *Outside the XY: A bklyn boihood Anthology*, self-awareness of the radical potential linked to Black and brown identities can engender transformative engagement with the gender binary and masculinity. The various submissions in the text focus on the development of "consciousness[es] that undoubtedly grow from the lived experience[s] of existing within and resisting multiple and connected practices of domination and normalization," as evidenced by the radical self-reflection and self-critique within the anthology (Cohen 440). For the queer and/or trans Black and brown people featured in the text, any interest in and connection to masculinity must be grounded in a refusal to propagate a disrespectful relationship to femininity, and it is deemed imperative to strive for "a Black and Queer Boi masculinity that is defined by love for black womanhood" (Clack 316). Through engagement with different, non-normative ways to embody masculine energies, masculine-identified Black and brown folx who were assigned female at birth are undermining the supposed necessity of the deprecation of femininity.

This process includes the creation and popularization of new vocabulary that reframes relationships to masculinity and femininity. As noted by the Black director Inge Blackman, "Naming is powerful. Black people and gay people [are] constantly renaming ourselves is a way to shift power from whites and hets respectively" (Johnson 124). Agency is amassed by queer and/or trans people of color who invent and popularize terms of self-identification that foreground the interplay between different components of their identity, rather than rely on terms that presuppose whiteness. A couple of such terms are "butch" and "lesbian," which are unmarked in their signification of whiteness and thus ignore the importance of race in maintaining an oppositional, exclusive gender binary. The term "masculine of centre" (or MoC) has been increasingly used within queer and trans of color circles because it recognizes "that the balance each of us determines around our own masculinity and femininity [...] is never truly fixed," and encourages consideration of one's relationship to various energies simultaneously instead of one at the expense of the other (Cole 97). The term implies the complexity of the interconnection between mas-

culinity and femininity rather than understanding the former only as the opposite of the latter. For the Black and brown folx who have been labeled female and wish to influence and define masculinity on their own terms, changes in the language used for self-identification reflects a demand for a shift in how masculinity is dominantly understood and prescribed.

This exploration through language and practice mandates that masculine-identifying people who were labeled female at birth "invest in a kind of masculinity that does not innately tether to white-supremacist, heteronormativity, capitalist, patriarchy" (Hurley 31). As previously noted in regards to whiteness and queerness, even if one possesses an identity that is non-normative in certain respects, one is not exempt from reinforcing other oppressions. For those who are MoC, vigilance is required against the reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms, specifically via misogynoir (coined by Moya Bailey) and its corollary, transmisogynoir (coined by Trudy), terms that specify the oppressions experienced by Black cis women and trans women respectively due to the intersections of their identities. Rather than passively benefit from the privilege that comes with masculinity and replicate the violence that white patriarchal norms mandate, masculine Black and brown individuals assigned female at birth must exist in solidarity with fellow queer and trans of color folx who exist in close relation to the feminine.

Conclusion

The embodied redefinition of masculinity by queer and trans individuals of color has enormous potential for society at large since demonstrated respect and gratitude for femininity represents the idea that "articulation and commitment to mutual support can truly be the test of unity when pursuing transformational politics" (Cohen 482). Upending assumptions that make up the white supremacist gender binary will lead to even more questioning of the capitalist, patriarchal, anti-Black power structures that constitute our society. From this questioning, new futures (and present realities) can be envisioned and co-created. This essay, "Transformative Engagement with Hegemonic Masculinity," was intended to contribute to the legacy of imaginative, deliberate collaboration but is obviously not complete in examining subversion of hegemonic masculinity. There is a need for nuance and complexity when regarding constructions of gender, race, and other axes of identification, and there are other lines of inquiry that would complement and complicate this work. In order to dismantle the construction of a dominant, white supremacist masculinity, holistic incorporations of various societal forces is required, and I hope for this paper to be a resource for individuals considering their own subjectivity in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity.

Micah Fedenko *is a self-identified Black, multiracial, trans*, and queer student at Vassar College with roots in Brooklyn, NY. They are compelled to encourage healing when possible, organize where there is hope, and perform where there is music. For*

those wishing to collaboratively imagine and co-create in the name of liberation, feel free to contact them at fedenko16@gmail.com.

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Notes

1 In the United States, people with any familial association with Blackness are classified as Black, even if they have a white parent or are light-skinned. Historically, children who were the result of white men's violations to Black women's bodies were deemed Black since whiteness is an exclusive racial status that is devoted to maintaining "purity."

Exulansis;

A Note on Puberty and Language

M. David Ford

1.

Today is the last day that I'm using words
They've gone out, lost their meaning
Don't function anymore

Words are fickle things. They can be short and to-the-point, or long and strange (like the title of this essay), requiring a thesaurus to deduce their meanings. Put together, they are ornate and possess illuminative qualities, or they fall flat. Phrases become dulled from clichéd overuse. Sentences bind expressions in grammatical barriers, foreboding cultural sensibilities. And names can be used to succinctly define personhood. My late grandfather called me *professor* for my "proper" speech; my high school classmates accused me of "sounding white." In college, the sassy lingo I picked up in Atlanta ("*chile*, please") was distinct from that of the girls in New York while my ghetto Midwestern twang ("I *aks*ed you a question") was comical to virtually everyone.

I am not talking about code-switching here. In these varied situations, I am not necessarily trying to communicate the same message to unique audiences with slight variations in syntax or verbiage. I am talking about speaking from entirely different lexes in different spaces, and the struggle of being misunderstood when your audience is speaking a language different than yours. When we communicate with one another across subject positions and cultural backgrounds, indeed, some terms may be analogous, especially if we are born of split worlds or if our cultures are within relative proximity, but we are usually saying totally different things with totally different meanings and are often in need of translation. Most of us aren't aware of this phenomenon as children.

I grew up absolutely, madly in love with words. I read the dictionary for fun. I would carefully comb through thesaurus entries, having brief internal deliberations on the most suitable term to match the sentiment of the idea I was hoping to communicate. I took vocabulary homework and wrote entire short stories based on the assigned list rather than writing a mere short sentence for each term. Words, from books to articles, Bible verses and journal entries, sustained my livelihood.

This was before I really knew how to describe myself. At elementary age, prohibited from listening to any genre of music other than gospel, I would gaze at photos of Mary Mary and Yolanda Adams, Donald Lawrence and Kirk Franklin, and wonder why the levels of passion I held for them differed, finding the former two very pretty and the latter two a little

something more than pretty. I also wondered how, exactly, had Donnie McClurkin managed to be "saved" from the "spirit of homosexuality" and now have a beautiful wife? Do the feelings ever completely diminish? Would those feelings render him some sort of… "(closeted) bisexual?" Having finally been exposed to the likes of Ja Rule, Ashanti, Usher, and Beyoncé shortly thereafter, I asked myself that last question again and figured I had to "pick one" for surely one could not occupy two worlds at once.

Then, puberty struck. I was suddenly hyperaware of my body and the thoughts that had been dirtying my head for what seemed like an eternity, so I sought external answers that would hopefully feed an internal balance. I inhaled the sweaty, muscular, rapidly moving bodies of WWE pro wrestlers on the television screen, hoping to catch a glimpse of a boner as they climbed and rolled over each other, all the while fashioning a pale pink ribbon and a swatch of white linen as a dress on a doll's body. Surely these men, like me, were a little gay. During commercials, I fantasized CM Punk sliding on top of me in bed (I know I had bad taste) and walked before my full-length mirror, tucking my genitals between my increasingly hairy legs and caressing my practically flat breasts, wondering whether I were just gay or wanted to be a woman.

And inside
We're all still wet
Longing and yearning
How can I explain how I feel?

I was sure that I would one day have my penis removed, grow my kinky hair past my shoulders, and wear long, flowy, ornately patterned, warm-colored "dresses" (I never liked calling clothes by their standardized labels). When I saw myself in my head, I quite literally did not see who society would label a *boy*. I saw someone straddling in-between, with a soft smile, a hearty, wide-mouthed laugh, hair that bounced when I turned my head, a graceful nod when delivering a speech or talking with strangers. And with light, perky boobs. This person was totally uncategorizable, possessing my face—mustache, goatee, and all—with toned biceps and, later down the line, tattoos covering my arms, chest, and lower back.

There were no words to describe this vision of me. And the world in which I spoke this visual language included only me, myself, and I. I knew that my classmates and very few friends would not understand my projection, just as my family did not understand my fondness for styling my cousin's Bratz dolls—or even why my cousin kept letting me play with the damned dolls.

Around this time, I discovered the liberating power of writing and found time to sit at my desk at home, in church, or at the hospital visiting my granddad and write *by hand* every day. I had always written—comic books at age five, personal essays and a full-blown zine by nine, articles and scripts by 12—but puberty ushered me into a deeper romance with words. I would write myself into alternate galaxies, developing a penchant

for analyzing the notion of duality and researching personality disorders, eventually starting a novella about a biracial teenage boy. I watched indie films like *Hard Candy* and *Somewhere* and television series like *The United States of Tara*, *The L Word*, and *Bones* (yes, white women) representing precociously de-gendered behavior on more of a spectrum than a binary, moving away from depicting women as neurotic, emotionally dependent creatures and toward more whole, healthy, and self-sufficient beings.

New questions emerged: Did I ever want to be married? Deciding a very early "hell no" to that question, with what gender(s) did I imagine myself having a long-term partnership, and what role did I see myself playing in other people's wedding ceremonies if I were to be involved? Did I want children? If so, how would I decide on their names, determined to make them as sexually ambiguous as possible?

And again, I knew no words for any of this. When high school classmates, seeing that I never spoke of a girlfriend, asked me of my sexuality, I said I was asexual or, thanks to Tumblr, claimed that I was "grey-romantic." I wrote my first published article on how I did not believe in love at all (while condemning Taylor Swift in the same breath). And this lack of language made me… placeless, budding an anti-everything disposition and an inkling that I would never find peace in my own body. I gradually fell out of love with words.

2.

Words are useless
Especially sentences
They don't stand for anything
How can I explain how I feel?

The English language is one of the most convoluted and difficult to learn. We have meticulous and finicky syntax. We have a bloated lexicon of synonyms. We have all these fucking words yet many of them don't come close to truly elucidating the ideas and emotions that we try to communicate. English nouns are particularly pesky, limiting and totalizing, of the emotions or actions we feel or wish to pursue in relation to others. We experience "heartbreak" brought on by sadness when what we likely mean is that we are shocked by ireful or distressing behavior or that we are hurt by someone's decision to not keep a promise. We have "regrets" over mishaps when we really want to acknowledge when something, someone, has managed to elude us. Worst, the academy minimizes personal attitudes to make communication more "efficient," a concept so dear to the pulsing heart of academia that the use of "I" statements is a relatively recent development.

Of the English language, perhaps the most beautiful and useful words we have are adjectives, words that color the portraits and landscapes we hope to illustrate for one another, from our innermost thoughts to the outside world. Adjectives allow us to go deep, to imaginatively describe what we see, hear, touch, say, and smell, to imbue our cross-cultural inter-

actions with real spirit. *Spirit*—that's it. Adjectives live, as spirits do, and evoke memories, feelings, futures. And maybe, just maybe, adjectives can be used to set us free. Perhaps this is what Fergie means when she says that she is *fergalicious*, a term she invented to describe her taste. We can speak with one another more vividly rather than making constant, vain attempts to translate nouns that most of us could never hope to accurately understand.

Like *love*: outside of whiteness, people of color (I use that term loosely) have infinite ways of showing our adoration for one another, often with our bodies. We do more than merely hug. We dance, ceaselessly. We dress our families in fabrics that speak of our heritages, as to say, "You belong with us." We sing ballads that communally answer the question, "You *feel* me?" with an enthusiastic and tearful, "Yes!" What colonial language stripped from us, we preserve spiritually and transcend the natural.

And all that you've ever learned
Try to forget
I'll never explain again

The term "queer" never really worked for me. If it were up to me, I would say that we are indeed "normal," giving ourselves over to the fluid *masculine* and *feminine* within us, never running out of combinations of clothes, hair, and makeup (or the lack thereof) and methods of talking, sharing, and organizing. It is those who think they need to be "straight" who are the odd ones, rebuking their inherent divinity in exchange for *safety* and *logic*. But we're not going to play that game here.

As such, I've always found the ever-elongating acronym LGBTQQIAA++ so exhaustingly useless. Yes, there is power in naming but there is even more power in feeling and exhibiting. When I discovered the term *non-binary,* I thought, "Where the hell has this term been all my life?" I was 19 when I switched my pronouns to they/them/theirs, started identifying as non-binary, and went by the mononymous *Ford*. I had never felt so secure in my body.

I was 21 when I went on domestic exchange from Vassar to Atlanta and discovered the term *brista*. We, as colonized Africans, may not have the words we once used to describe our colorful and inherently "queer" sensibilities but we do have our spirits—and the spirit of *bristahood* is strong at Morehouse College. With Safe Space, the campus' only queer student organization, I learned the true meaning of being non-binary. It was not that I had found a home with other non-binary-identified people; in fact, my closest friend at the House once told me that I was their only non-binary friend, compared to the vast community of gender-benders at Vassar. Rather, in being non-binary, I learned how to live amongst a plethora of identities, experiences, subject positions, and cultural heritages. *Brista*—like E. Patrick Johnson's *quare*, a southern remix of *queer,* situated in ebonics (I don't care to use the more academically acceptable "African-American Vernacular English")—combines "brother" and "sister"

and refutes standardized pronunciation. *Brista*, a word of a different language, thereby escaping English grammatical rules, plays as both adjective and noun, identifying and describing personhood. One's body and behavior are both non-binary.

These days, I don't desire boobs, I don't mind having a penis, I don't care what pronouns you call me, and I don't usually like white wrestlers. But I am gradually more willing to feed this "bisexual" proclivity, and I have found words—or idols—to describe that uncategorizable though undeniably black creature as a hybrid of many gods: I'm a bad bitch, bathed in tasteful, strategically placed tattoos like Rihanna's with the hair of Luka Sabbat, swagger like Swae Lee, and the wardrobe and giddy smile of Solána Rowe. I am every woman. I'm a zaddy (only a *man* at Morehouse). I'm a nigga, a brotha, a dancer, a player, a faggot, one of the *gworls*. And if this essay is any testament to this, I'm cool with words.

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"Boihood is the ultimate liberation"

Transcendence of Colonial Constructions of Gender and Sexuality and Liberatory Potentialities of Self-Identification

Spencer Garcia

Abstract

This article focuses on the self-identifier "boi," and how its use by non-heterosexual Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color breaks down and transcends the colonial categories of "gender" and "sexuality." [1] Additionally, the essay demonstrates how bois of color unsettle the colonial constructions of "cisgender" and "transgender" through their fluid understandings of gender, gender/ed expressions and presentations, and gender(ed) roles. My research is informed by *testimonios*, articles, and poetry written by bois of color across print and online sources, community organizations, such as bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project, and interviews with self-identified bois of color.[2] Grounding my theorizations in lived experiences of boihood, I posit that bois of color challenge the dehumanization they experience on the basis of their racialization through their self-identifications. Lastly, this article provides an opportunity to further consider how the ways in which non-heterosexual Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color name themselves embodies anti-colonial resistance and liberatory potentialities.

keywords: boi, self-identification, naming, gender, sexuality, lesbian, transmasculine, non-binary

Introduction

First and foremost, my article serves as a platform for self-identified bois of color to share their experiences of boihood. Bois of color are rarely spoken about within the academy, and when they are, they are often written about by non-bois of color and without being consulted. I believe that it is absolutely essential to center their narratives in my theorizations on boihood, and to complicate the location of this conversation within, outside of, and against the academy. In my interviews, bois of color voiced their concerns about the lack of non-racist representations of bois of color in academia, and the importance of sharing their stories to challenge mainstream narratives about bois of color. Therefore, it is my hope that this article will act as a starting point from which bois of color can continue to have their voices heard inside and outside of the academy, and that their lives are celebrated

for more than just their value as analytical subjects or contributions to queer of color theory and praxis.

In presenting the lived experiences of bois of color, my article will demonstrate how boihood breaks down and transcends the colonial constructions of "gender" and "sexuality," as well as the constructions of "cisgender" and "transgender." As I will discuss, these categories were created to enact violence against those who "deviated" from the established sexual and gender norms. The use of "boi" as a self-identifier and as a naming of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions challenges the binarization of the aforementioned categories, and resists this categorically-based violence.[3] In addition to identifying with boihood, many bois of color also identify with terms of sexual and romantic desire and gender/ed expression that have emerged from colonial understandings of gender and sexuality. Rather than reproduce the violence of these constructions, bois of color disrupt these identifications to reclaim their own sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions and to fight against the dehumanization they experience as a result of their racialization.

When I began this project, I was initially frustrated with the lack of sources about boihood and bois of color. As my research continued, this frustration turned to anger as the majority of texts I came across relied on and perpetuated homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, and racist stereotypes of bois of color and boihood. Many of these sources also reinforced the gender binary and conceptions of cis-ness and trans-ness, and depended on the separation of gender from sexuality to articulate their conceptions of boihood.[4] One of the most well-known articles about boihood, Ariel Levy's "Where the Bois Are," portrays bois as hypermasculine, hypersexual, and misogynstic, and employs transphobic rhetoric to describe bois, their bodies and body modifications, and their variety of pronouns. In addition to its popularity outside the academy, the article is frequently cited in academic texts about boihood.[5] Unfortunately, many of these mainstream narratives are rarely critiqued within or outside of the academy and are presented as the authority on the topic of boihood.

Anson Koch-Rein's dissertation, *Mirrors, Monsters, Metaphors: Transgender Rhetorics and Dysphoric Knowledge*, serves as one of the few critiques of recent discussions of boihood. His chapter "Peter Pan and Feminist Boihood" cites Levy's article, as well as Michelle Ann Abate's "When Girls Will Be Bois: Female Masculinity, Genderqueer Identity, and Millennial LGBTQ Culture" and Sarah Trimble's "Playing Peter Pan: Conceptualizing 'Bois' in Contemporary Queer Theory." Koch-Rein critiques Abate's whitening of the term "boi," as well the whitewashing of bois themselves. He also points to how Abate presents the history of the term as a linear evolution, as opposed to recognizing that "'boi' has been circulating in various contexts and communities[…] and that the term has described a number of alternative masculinities with at times contradictory, at times intersecting and closely affiliated agendas and identifications" (Koch-Rein 230). In his discussion of Trimble, Koch-Rein troubles her reliance on the

body to determine bois' potential for misogyny and feminism, and her reproduction of some elements of Levy's narrative, even as she appears to be in opposition to it (235–236). Lastly, Koch-Rein discusses community organizations such as bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project, and highlights boi politics that work to dismantle misogyny and uplift women and girls of color (Koch-Rein 231–232).

In addition to the above issues, many texts argue that boihood at the very least implies a connotation of or connection to masculinity (Abate 21–22; Erickson-Schroth 616; Levy; Steinberg 5–9; Trimble 75–76). Without directly consulting bois, non-bois read boihood through the colonial lenses of gender, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, and assume that all bois view boihood as an inherently masculine identity. After conducting preliminary research, I wanted to ensure that my article acts as an intervention to current literature about bois of color and boihood. This desire, coupled with my belief that bois of color should have agency over their narratives of boihood, led me to interview four self-identified bois of color. I found my participants by posting in Facebook groups for self-identified queer and trans people of color. My participants are geographically diverse and currently reside in the following locales: New York City, New York; Inglewood, California; Oakland, California; and Maryland. They range in age from 24–32 years old, and racially identify as Black, non-white Latinx, and South Asian. While there are some commonalities between my participants' narratives, I do not wish to present them as representative of all bois of color; they simply provide insight into their own lives and experiences with boihood.

The next section of this article includes my theoretical and historical framework, which lays the foundation for understanding the colonial constructions of gender and sexuality in the United States. This context is essential to understanding how these categories, along with "cisgender" and "transgender," were created with the explicit purpose of dehumanizing Black people and Indigenous people. Additionally, this section provides the groundwork for my later theorizing on how bois of color achieve anti-colonial feats in their namings and reimaginings of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions. The next three sections will specifically focus on boihood, its indefinability, and its ability to transcend categorical constraints; bois' narratives of boihood and their complication of the binarization of gender/sexuality and cisgender/transgender; and boi politics and community organizations, such as bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project. The article concludes with further applications of my theorizations, and discusses the liberatory potentialities of boihood for non-heterosexual Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color more broadly.

Theoretical and Historical Framework

> Gender identity under whiteness is a tool, not an end. How do we get to that end, that world in which all of our genders or lack thereof aren't used as the basis for our inhuman treatment? That is the question.
>
> —*Hari Ziyad, "My Gender is Black"*

Boihood embodies the potentiality to reimagine the colonial conceptions of gender, sexuality, cisgender, and transgender for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color in the United States through its breaking down and transcendence of these categories.[6] Furthermore, I posit that boihood can challenge the dehumanization of queer and trans Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color through its resistance to the boundaries between the aforementioned categories, as well as the gender binary itself.[7] Considering Hari Ziyad's question at the beginning of this section, I wonder, if white notions of gender are no longer seen as a prerequisite for personhood, how can Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color name their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions, as well as reclaim their humanity, outside of the continued legacies of colonial violence and slavery? For me, non-heterosexual Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color who identify with boihood demonstrate one such resolution.

While some bois of color may also identify with other terms of sexual and romantic desire and of gender/ed expression, such as "lesbian," "non-binary," "transmasculine," and/or "trans man," among many others, their identification with boihood inherently complicates colonial understandings of gender and sexuality (Erickson-Schroth 612). Bois of color oftentimes navigate multiple systems of naming and self-identification, within and across the languages they speak. Some bois of color may find these namings, and their correlate understandings of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions, affirming, while others may subscribe to them purely out of convenience. In their article, "My Gender is Black," Ziyad writes,

> Part of creating space that *does* make room for Black people is acknowledging the way our current conception of gender is limited, and to try not to make a permanent home within this language even as we find it useful for the time being. This requires a (re)discovery of the ways we can relate to ourselves and our bodies that are conducive to our freedom (emphasis added).

They underscore how while some Black people may find a colonial framework of gender and sexuality useful, this usefulness should be seen as temporary. I argue that boihood can act as this "(re)discovery," and as a

naming in which Black people can forge liberatory constructions of these categories that do not alienate Black people from their bodies or result in dehumanization.

Slavery, Ungendering, and the Dehumanization of Black People

I provide the following historical framework to place my theorizations of boihood and the liberatory potentialities of self-identification within the specific context of the legacies of slavery and colonization in the United States, and to demonstrate how queer and trans Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color are always already seen as outside of colonial conceptions of cisgender and heterosexuality. Black and Indigenous queer and trans people are especially targeted by these constructions; even when they do not specifically name their sexual and romantic desires and gendered expressions as "queer" or "trans," they are deemed Other. Furthermore, all Black people and Indigenous people are forced outside of personhood and humanity in conjunction with and as a result of their place outside of colonial constructions of gender (Ziyad). The calculated exclusion from these categories of desire and gender/ed expression, and the construction of the categories themselves, emerges from the legacies and continuation of slavery and colonization. European colonizers strove to eliminate not only Black and Indigenous desires and gender/ed expressions, but Black and Indigenous peoples themselves.

From the beginning of slavery in (what would become) the United States, there has been a symbiotic relationship between the dehumanization of Black people and the exclusion of Black people from colonial constructions of gender and heterosexuality. Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" demonstrates how this exclusion from gender and humanity occurred even before African people entered the United States. In speaking of the Middle Passage she writes, "Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities. The female as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies 'less room' in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart" (Spillers 72). The position of African people in the Middle Passage as slaves, and consequently as "property," designated them as both genderless and non-human. Ziyad exemplifies how this ungendering and dehumanization continues beyond the era of slavery, when they write, "In the afterlife of slavery, Blackness is that which is denied access to humanity, and thus Blackness is denied access to human gender/sexuality identities." They emphasize how, historically and in the present-day, Black gender/ed expressions are positioned as outside of (white) womanhood and manhood, and as outside of personhood and humanity entirely.

Slavery, along with processes of colonization, established and enforced systems that inextricably intertwined notions of gender, race, and

humanity. In the introduction to *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander G. Weheliye posits that,

> There exists no portion of the modern human that is not subject to racialization, which determines the hierarchical ordering of the Homo sapiens species into humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans; as a result, humanity has held a very different status for the traditions of the racially oppressed (8).

These classifications of "human" and "non-human" were inherently gendered as well, due to the ungendering of African people through the Middle Passage and slavery. Therefore, racialized gender oppression and dehumanization, in some ways, become synonymous with one another. Weheliye suggests that, "we might do well to conceive humanity as a relational ontological totality, however fractured this totality might be" (32). Understanding humanity as relational, and as situated within a hierarchy of humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, exemplifies how slavery and colonization have specifically structured the devaluation of Black people and their gender/ed expressions (Weheliye 8).

This paper is dedicated to both demonstrating and imagining how bois of color can transcend and break down this hierarchy of humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, and the liberatory potentialities of boihood in combating the racialized gender oppression and dehumanization of Black people. C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* emphasizes the entanglement of race and gender during and as a result of slavery in the United States. He writes, "Captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being… the ungendering of blackness is also the context for imagining gender as subject to rearrangement" (Snorton 57). While this ungendering of Blackness emerges from slavery and colonial violence, I wonder if we can utilize these "distinctive understandings of suffering [to] serve as the speculative blueprint for new forms of humanity, which are defined above all by overdetermined conjurings of freedom" (Weheliye 14). Returning to Ziyad's question in the epigraph, how can we use these historical understandings of gendering and un-gendering to create liberatory potentialities of Black gender/ed expressions and humanity?

While my theorizations on bois of color and boihood will primarily focus on the sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions of queer and trans Black people, I believe it is necessary to understand how all Black people are perceived as failing gender. If self-identified cisgender heterosexual Black people fundamentally cannot conform to colonial notions of cisgender and heterosexuality, then queer and trans Black people are especially targeted for racialized gender oppression. Colonial constructions of cisgender are always already sites of violence and exclusion for Black people, regardless of their self-identification. In "Punks, Bulldag-

gers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," Cathy Cohen illuminates how heterosexual-identifying Black people experience state-sanctioned oppression on the basis of their sexual and romantic desires and practices, and challenges the conflation of heteronormativity with heterosexuality (Cohen 26, 31). She writes, "the roots of heteronormativity are in white-supremacist ideologies that sought (and continue) to use the state and its regulation of sexuality[…] to designate which individuals were truly 'fit' for the full rights and privileges of citizenship" (Cohen 38). I draw attention to her work to demonstrate how the categories of "cisgender" and "heterosexual" inherently exclude Black people due to their foundations in slavery. These categories structure determinations of humanity, as personhood rather than status as property, was required for citizenship in the United States.

Colonization and the Erasure of Indigenous Gender/ed Expressions

As Black people were purposefully excluded from colonial constructions of cisgender, heterosexuality, and humanity, Indigenous people in what is now known as North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean were also targeted for racialized gender oppression and dehumanization. Weheliye advises that,

> While we should most definitely bring into focus the relays betwixt and between the genocide of indigenous populations in the Americas [and] the transatlantic slave trade… we cannot do so in the grammar of comparison, since this will merely reaffirm Man's existent hierarchies rather than design novel assemblages of relation (13).

I hope to exemplify how notions of racialized gender violence and dehumanization affected and continue to affect Black and Indigenous people through a dialogical and relational presentation of historical and theoretical context, rather than through comparison. Additionally, it is necessary to recognize how the systems of slavery and colonization were in no way isolated, and rather how they intimately worked together to subjugate, exploit, and enact violence upon Black people, Indigenous people, and Afro-Indigenous people.

b. binaohan's *decolonizing trans/gender 101* illustrates how processes of colonization and the continuation of colonial violence has constructed present-day understandings of the categories of "gender" and "sexuality," as well as conceptualizations of "cisgender" and "transgender." binaohan primarily focuses on how the concepts of transgender and homosexuality were created with the specific purpose of eradicating Indigenous peoples' sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions, and ultimately Indigenous people themselves. They place the gender binary within the context of colonial violence, and write, "The binary [was] needed upon the moment that colonizers encountered Indigenous people embodying

genders that were incoherent to them. [It] became necessary so that they could: first, conceptualize these incoherent genders, second, that once 'understood' they could eradicate these genders" (binaohan 125). binaohan demonstrates how European colonizers specifically constructed the gender binary to position all Indigenous gender/ed expressions as outside of colonial ideas of "gender" and "sexuality," and therefore, how this served as the foundation from which Indigenous people were targeted for violence and erasure.

As binaohan expresses, the gender binary was instituted upon European colonizers' *arrival* to (what would become) the United States. This binary system of gender, which dictated notions of cis-ness and trans-ness, established gender norms, and gendered certain Indigenous expressions and practices, was specifically formulated as a method of colonizing Indigenous people as opposed to being brought over from Europe. In "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," María Lugones explains that this gender system "created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. [It] introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing" (186). Lugones points to the practice of establishing "gender" as a marker of status within colonial hierarchies, and how this system inherently constructed European colonizers as superior to Indigenous people. Therefore, this process positioned Indigenous people as lesser in terms of both "gender" and humanity.

As with the ungendering and dehumanization of Black people, European colonizers similarly constructed humanity in relation to race, gender, and sexuality when enacting violence against Indigenous people. In Chapter Five of *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander presents Vasco Núñez de Balboa's conquest in Panama as one such example. She describes how Balboa and his army killed six hundred Indigenous warriors and fed forty Indigenous people to dogs because they were wearing "women's" clothing (Alexander 196). This act demonstrates how colonial conquest inherently encompasses gender violence, and how gender norms were established through colonization. Additionally, Alexander draws attention to how, "territorial claims and citizenship claims work hand in hand, and both are racialized and gendered. It is not only that the colony is not worth having unless it can be made heterosexual, it is also that the violent assertion of white citizenship reserves personhood for white masculinity alone" (198). As seen with Cohen's analysis of state-sanctioned oppression and Black people's sexual and romantic desires, notions of gender, sexuality, citizenship, and humanity coalesce to enact violence upon Indigenous people.

binaohan expresses similar sentiments to Alexander, Spillers, and Ziyad regarding the construction of gender as the categorical basis from which Black and Indigenous people are violently excluded, erased, and eliminated. They write, "The binary as tool of oppression is [about] legit-

imizing a white notion of manhood and a white notion of womanhood. [This] is inextricably tied to who is considered 'human' and who isn't. There are only two kinds of human beings: white men and white women" (binaohan 126). Keeping in mind Weheliye's idea of relational humanity and Ziyad's musing on white constructions of gender, we are reminded that Black people and Indigenous people inherently cannot conform to colonial conceptions of (white) manhood, and womanhood, and are restricted access to humanity as a result. However, this does not mean that Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color do not have sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions; rather, this means that we need to reimagine how these desires and expressions are named and celebrated.

Black and Indigenous oppression needs to be understood relationally rather than comparatively to recognize how slavery and colonization have historically and continue presently to erase and eliminate Black people and Indigenous people and their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions. The enslavement of Black people and the genocide of Indigenous people occurred simultaneously, and purposefully worked together to establish settler colonialism itself (Morgensen 57). Black and Indigenous oppression in the United States is inherently intertwined, even as violence experienced by Black and Indigenous people and communities remains distinct in a myriad of ways. We must remember that "the colonial era never ended because settler colonialism remains the naturalised activity projecting Western law" (Morgensen 53–54). Slavery, colonization, and settler colonialism constructed hierarchies of gender, race, and humanity, and these systems of power continue to operate in the present-day to enact violence upon Black people and Indigenous people who cannot adhere to colonial constructions of gender and sexuality.

Categorical Distinctions: Gender vs. Sexuality and Resultant Identities

The separation of gender from sexuality inherently assumes a distinction between transgender and homosexuality, and therefore between cisgender and transgender as well. These categories rely on each other to establish determinations of "deviant" sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions, and structure the resultant violence against those who cannot conform to colonial sexual and gender norms. David Valentine's "The Categories Themselves" demonstrates how the category of "transgender" emerges as distinct from "homosexuality," as a result of the separation of gender from sexuality. Valentine writes of ball culture, and how many Black people and Latinx people within ball communities describe themselves as "gay" regardless of how their gender/ed expressions are perceived by others. While many people know that social service institutions classify them as "transgender," Valentine posits that their use of "gay" to describe their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions is "defined not by a distinction between 'gender' and 'sexuality' but by the conjunction of their disenfranchise-

ment in terms of both class and racial memberships and their non-normative 'genders' or 'sexualities'" (217, 218). Therefore, these self-identifications rely on naming sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions in relation to, rather than separate from, experiences of racialization.

If we recognize, as Valentine argues, that the categories of "gender" and "sexuality" have "meanings [that] can shift, are historically produced, and are drawn on in particular social contexts," then how do we define "transgender"—if we can define it at all (215)? T. Benjamin Singer's "The Profusion of Things: The 'Transgender Matrix' and Demographic Imaginaries in US Public Health" exemplifies how the category of "transgender" largely relies on definitions put forth by social services institutions rather than from the people and communities that the labels claim to describe. These institutions attempt to define "transgender," with the objective of determining their constituents but fail to recognize how this categorization tends to exclude many of the people, and especially people of color, who they believe their services exist for. Oftentimes, social service institutions use "transgender," or simply "trans," to describe people who they deem "gender non-conforming," or even more broadly, anyone who they consider "non-cisgender" (Singer 59). Singer posits that this results in the construction of "social imaginaries" which "are high-stakes biopolitical projects with the power to enact categories of personhood, construed as a priori material realities, that can either diminish or enhance the life chances of the people interpellated by those categories" (60). These institutions position "transgender" as capturing a pre-existing ontological experience, rather than as a historically, socially, and culturally contingent self-identifier.

Singer and binaohan both discuss how the separation of gender from sexuality, and consequently transgender from homosexuality, renders the sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color as incoherent to the colonial understandings of these categories. binaohan describes their own identification of "bakla," and writes, "this ID encompasses both what would be considered 'gender' and 'sexuality' in white western discourse, except because it doesn't reside within white gender discourse, it actually represents a continuum of different genders, sexualities, and gender expressions all of which are covered by this one word" (32–33). Singer discusses the identifications of "femme queens," and writes, "Identificatory variability is attributed to the fact that *if transgender exists at all* in low-income communities of color, it is formed from the inextricable relation of sexuality and gender identity. This makes 'femme queen' an identifier of sexuality as much as a gender descriptor" (69, my emphasis). "Bakla," "femme queen," and "gay" represent three of many namings employed by Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color to express their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions that challenge colonial constructions of gender and sexuality. As I will discuss, I believe that "boi" acts as another naming that transcends the binary between gender and sexuality, and

complicates distinctions between transgender and homosexuality. The colonially imposed boundary between transgender and homosexuality continues to reinforce the binary between transgender and cisgender. Once gender non-conformity is immediately deemed as "trans," rather than viewed with nuance, "cisgender" becomes established as the representation of normative gender/ed expressions. A. Finn Enke's "The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies" explores the construction of the cis/trans binary and questions how the boundary between cisgender and transgender is determined. Enke recognizes that the construction of "cisgender" largely depends on gender normativity, and that this normativity relies on the embodiment of hegemonic articulations of race, ability, and class (62). As Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color cannot conform to normative or dominant constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and humanity, they cannot achieve status as cisgender. This is not to disregard the lived realities and material privileges of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color who identify as or are perceived as cisgender, but to challenge the strict distinction between cisgender and transgender.

"Boi with an i": Indefinability, Rhizomatic Readings, and Transcendence of Categorical Constraints

Boihood escapes definition and transcends categorical constraints through its existence as a liminal and ambiguous embodiment of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions. Even as terms of self-identification hold a variety of meanings within and across the people who identify with them, most terms have a generally agreed upon definition. In pursuing this research, I was continually met with the notion that boihood was indefinable, even as bois of color attempted to describe the term themselves. When speaking with bois of color, they frequently referred to boihood as freeing and liberating, and not confining, constricting, or limiting in terms of what being a boi could mean to them or other bois. Many non-bois present boihood as an inherently masculine identity, but bois of color, and especially femme bois, directly challenge this centering of masculinity and present boihood as encompassing more expansive understandings and experiences. So where does this leave us? Or more precisely, where do we begin? If boihood is not (solely) about masculinity, then what is it about? While this article may or may not answer these questions, I am more interested in theorizing what boihood *does*, rather than what it *is*.

I pose these questions as it is exactly this indeterminability of boihood that lends itself to the creation of liberatory potentialities in and celebrations of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. In presenting multiple narratives of boihood, I will demonstrate how the varied manifestations and articulations of "boi" inevitability break down and transcend the colonial categories of gender, sexuality, cisgender, and transgender.

Instead of attempting to construct a legible narrative of boihood, I will offer rhizomatic readings of "boi" as a framework for navigating particular (but varied) manifestations of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions. Juana María Rodríguez's concept of the rhizome helps us to identify links between the seemingly disparate yet interconnected articulations of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions embodied by bois of color, even (and especially) when they appear as contradictory to each other or illegible to the aforementioned colonial constructions.

In the first chapter of *Queer Latinidad*, Juana María Rodríguez questions identity construction and articulation through the examples of "queer," "Latinidad," and "queer latinidad." She asks, "what do these [identities] actually explain about our lives?" to question the usefulness of understanding our experiences, memories, interactions, and day-to-day lives through the notion of "identity" (Rodríguez 21). Similarly, I seek to interrogate what the categories of "gender," "sexuality," "cisgender," and "transgender" attempt to capture about our lived realities, and what this means for those who name themselves as "boi." Rodríguez turns to her theoretical concept of the rhizome to think through the meanings of "Latinidad" and "Latinx identity." She writes,

> A rhizomatic reading of *latinidad* suggests the process through which contested constructions of identity work to constitute one another, emphasizing 'and' over 'is' as a way to think about differences. So *latinidad* is about the 'dimensions' or 'the directions in motion' of history and culture and geography and language and self-named identities. Even if individual narratives used to chart these discourses contradict or exclude one another, the site of rupture will itself serve as a new site of knowledge production (Rodríguez 22, emphasis added).

If we picture a material rhizome, a plant stem is able to send roots further into the ground and shoots above the surface, and can produce new plants if broken apart (Jang, Cheol Seong, et al). The rhizome continually grows in multiple contradictory directions, and also provides new opportunities for growth beyond its initial planting. Employing this rhizomatic framework, Rodríguez forges space for the wide variety of manifestations and articulations through time-space of "Latinidad," even if they appear as contradictory or antithetical to the notion of categorical constraints and the idea of a cohesive identity. Similarly, I believe that "boi" would benefit from a rhizomatic reading, as this can account for the multitude of manifestations of boihood in relation to and against the categorical constraints of gender, sexuality, cisgender, and transgender.

In my rhizomatic readings, I want to highlight the importance of conceptualizing "boi" through the framework of "'and' over 'is'" and celebrating how "even if individual narratives used to chart these discourses contradict one another, the site of rupture will itself serve as a new site of

knowledge production" (Rodríguez 22). Boihood is not any one thing, and rather can and does exist as varied forms of sexual and romantic desire, gender/ed expression, modes of being, politics, spirituality, and liberation. The incoherent, illegible, and contradictory potentialities contained within boihood exemplify and contribute to its ability to elude colonial constructions of gender, sexuality, cis-ness, and trans-ness; even when bois of color employ these concepts in their articulations of boihood, they subvert the historical and present-day legacies of slavery and colonization that are attached to them. Bois of color ultimately render these categorizations useless, and foster namings of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions that allow Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color to "relate to ourselves and our bodies [in ways] that are conducive to our freedom" and that directly combat dehumanization (Ziyad).

Illegible Identifications and Anti-Colonial Namings of Sexual Desire and Gender/ed Expressions

Across my research, I found that bois of color employ an assortment of terms related to the concepts of gender and sexuality in their descriptions of "boi" and boihood. Bois of color discuss boihood in relation to ideas of womanhood, manhood, femininity, masculinity, cis-ness, and trans-ness, and may affirm and/or reject these concepts in their articulations. In my interviews, bois of color also used other language, as well as feelings and energies, to describe their experiences as bois and with boihood. I noticed that bois of color often navigate their relationships to boihood through what I deem primary and secondary identifications. While I recognize the hierarchical connotations of "primary" and "secondary," I hope to use these terms to demonstrate the variety of relationships to boihood held by bois of color. For some bois of color, their boi-ness is placed at the center of their identifications; for others, they employ the language of boihood in addition to terms of self-identification such as "lesbian," "non-binary," "transmasculine," and/or "trans man." Consequently, these varied and simultaneous identifications with boihood render "boi" as expansive enough to contain what appears to be contradictory experiences of the same identity.

When asked to describe boihood, the bois of color I interviewed gave a range of responses that included (but wasn't limited to) sexual and romantic desires, gender/ed expressions, energy, emotionality, spirituality, femininity, and masculinity.[8] While they largely focused on what boihood means to them, most bois also expressed their frustrations with misconceptions about boihood and the expectations that have been placed onto them due to their self-identification. Therefore, bois of color actively resist colonial conceptions of gender and "sexuality," and the viewing of boihood through that lens. In our conversations, bois of color described their experiences with boihood in the following ways:

> Boihood allows for softness. It allows for femme bois to exist, and masc bois to exist. It allows us to break down what masculinity looks like and feels like. For me, masculinity doesn't have a particular look. It has a particular feeling and anybody can house that feeling, just as anyone can house femininity. Boihood allows for that expression, for that fluctuation (Cameron).

> I'm a boi, a Black boi. That's the label that I've chosen that's most comfortable for me and where I view my identity. I'm a boi because I'm not a woman and I'm not a man. My center, my core is masculine, with an aura of femininity sweeping around and keeping it alive, but the core, the beat is masculine (Jordan).

> I like the term boi because though it's fairly neutral, it's boy-ish but it's different than "boy" with a "y." I think it's a term where people can see it and get it. It's like little boy-ish, and that's how I feel. There's a lot of queer culture that I don't necessarily resonate with. But it's one of those terms where… it was very energizing. There's that identity that I fall into more clearly than anything else I've seen (Noah).

> I think I'm more comfortable, or I like to think that I'm more comfortable, with a feminine masculinity than I was with a masculine femininity. Because as a tomboy, it didn't feel quite right. And then now, as a femme boi, it feels fine (Caracol).

While Cameron, Jordan, Noah, and Caracol each describe boihood in relation to masculinity and femininity or manhood and womanhood, there is a strong emphasis on *feelings* in each of their responses. This focus on feelings, rather than a particular gender/ed expression and presentation or specific sexual and romantic desire demonstrates the ambiguity and indefinability of boihood. These bois, along with other bois of color, actively resist colonial expectations of normative manifestations of gender, sexuality, and boihood through their articulations of "boi."

Many mainstream narratives of boihood rely on racialized stereotypes of sexual desire and gender/ed expression, and consequently depict bois of color as hypersexual and hypermasculine. This also carries over into the emotional expectations of bois of color, particularly within sexual and romantic relationships. Cameron, a 24 year-old Black genderqueer boi living in Maryland, spoke of the expectations of masculinity present in their relationships:

> I was dating someone who preferred to date masculine presenting people, but when she met me she was like "you soft."

> She expected a lot of things from me that she expected from masculine presenting people in general. I couldn't be in a relationship where the expectation of the relationship was based on [their] perception of me or [their] gender assumptions… and if I don't perform masculinity in a particular way, [they] don't know how to relate to that, [they] don't know how to hold my softness, [they] don't know how to let me be free. It's hard to navigate that.

Similarly, Jordan, a 32 year-old Black boi from California, and Caracol, a 29 year-old Latinx femme boi from New York City, spoke of the sexual expectations of bois:

> I think about the idea that bois always top. It's like the idea that bois are supposed to be attracted to certain kinds of things or performance (Jordan).

> I always find it interesting, the way that people expect transmasculine people of color to be aggressive and [always] topping (Caracol).

These three accounts demonstrate the expectations of hypermasculinity placed on bois of color, and center the bois' active refusal of these stereotypes through their varied embodiments of boihood (which extend beyond gender/ed presentation). These sexual, romantic, and emotional expectations also position "boi" as an articulation of sexual and romantic desires in addition to a form of gender/ed expression. Consequently, this positioning breaks down and transcend the strict binary between gender and sexuality, and further expands and exemplifies the rhizomatic potentialities of boihood.

In addition to destabilizing the notion of a static "boi" identity, bois of color similarly unsettle colonial constructions of cis-ness and trans-ness. There are some bois of color who explicitly identify as trans/transgender or as belonging to the trans community, some who identify as non-binary, and others who may not directly identify as cis/cisgender or trans/transgender, but are labeled or perceived as one or the other either depending on the context. In "The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies," Enke questions, "What must stay the same and what must change to determine the distance between cis and trans? Or, is it not the fact of changing but rather the method by which one changes that distinguishes cis from trans? At precisely what point in time do transness and cis-ness depart from each other?" (71, 73). binaohan proposes that "we should understand that transgender people are those people who [identify] as transgender… a person can only be transgender if and only if they identify that way" (28). Therefore, I wonder if the only distinction between "cisgender" and "transgender" is self-identification. Certain changes

in gender/ed expression would denote "trans-ness" in some people, while only representing cisgender gender non-conformity in others.[9] If we are to continue to use the frameworks of cisgender and transgender, we should recognize that there is "variability within cis-ness, just as there is variation within trans-ness" and that these categories have more to do with enacting violence upon people who cannot adhere to gender norms than anything else (Enke 65).

In each of my interviews, the participants complicated notions of cis-ness and trans-ness through their individual primary and secondary identifications, and the identifications they encountered from other bois of color. By sharing these simultaneous but seemingly contradictory identifications, they also challenged the binarization of gender and sexuality, as well as of womanhood and manhood and femininity and masculinity. Through the following statements, they construct narratives of boihood that are illegible and incoherent to colonial constructions of gender and sexuality, and that make space for liberatory potentialities of self-identification:

> Recently, I've been more so identifying with the term genderqueer… I'm not completely sure how to identify, I almost feel without gender (Noah).

> I would identify as transmasculine, genderqueer, not really binary, as Caracol, and also cute… I would sometimes identify as a dyke… I have [identified as a dyke in the past], but I still feel like I identify with dyke culture and that's also just where I found community (Caracol).

> I know bois who identify as cis women. I know bois who identify as non-gender normative. I know bois who identify as trans men. We're all bois (Jordan).

> I would say that 'boi' could almost be like an umbrella term. I feel like cis women could identify as bois. Trans women can identify as bois, trans men can identify as bois. Anyone can identify as a boi. There's a part of me that hesitates to say that cis men can identify as bois, and that could just be something that I need to unpack. I do think that boihood is the ultimate liberation where you don't have to choose (Cameron).

Bois' primary and secondary identifications are great in number and variety; further, through the lens of colonial constructions of gender and sexuality, these identifications appear to directly contradict each other. How can lesbian women, heterosexual and queer trans men, and queer non-binary people all find home in the same term of self-identification? These simultaneous, contradictory identifications render boihood illegible to the colonial categories of gender, sexuality, cisgender, and transgender.

Boihood refuses to fit within these conceptualizations of sexual and romantic desire and gender/ed expression, and in doing so both breaks down and transcends the colonially-established hierarchies of racialized gender/ed expressions. Therefore, the categories created to enact violence against Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color lose the power needed to determine our humanity.

Due to boihood's indefinability, bois of color can and do move in and out of cis-ness and trans-ness. While the idea of moving between, or even outside of, the cis/trans binary seems impossible, this is precisely how boihood breaks down and transcends these baseless distinctions. Furthermore, some bois of color partially or completely reject identifying their place in the cis/trans binary, or only use these terms out of convenience. In our conversation, Cameron expressed their frustration with mainstream narratives of trans-ness, and when asked if they identify as cis/cisgender, trans/transgender, both, or neither, they replied,

> So my gender definitely doesn't align with the gender I was assigned at birth, but there are particular associations that I have with trans-ness that I'm still reconciling. I think I've internalized the message that the experience of trans-ness is a linear experience, and for me, my gender experience has been more of an integration as opposed to moving from one point to another. So rather than saying I'm moving towards more masculinity or presenting more masculinely, it's more so that I'm being allowed to integrate that part of myself into my body (Cameron).

Cameron's description of their process of navigating their gender challenges the binarization of cis-ness and trans-ness, and also calls into question what exactly constitutes these categories in the first place. While some people may label Cameron as "trans," their hesitancy to claim this naming for themself pushes back against the forced labeling of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions onto Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Similarly, when speaking with Noah, a 25 year-old South Asian genderqueer boi living in California, they discussed their experiences with the terms "cisgender" and "transgender." Speaking of their identification as genderqueer, and what that personally means to them, Noah describes a fluid relationship with cis-ness and trans-ness:

> I feel like identifying as cisgender or identifying as transgender necessarily excludes the other, and I don't feel like either of those is fully accurate… I tend to like terms like genderqueer, genderfluid, sort of identifying with parts of both, cis and trans (Noah).

Their movement in and out of cis-ness, trans-ness, and genderqueer-ness is completely illegible to colonial constructions of gender and sexuality,

which deem that you must be cisgender *or* transgender, and that this identification should not change over time.

Through these illegible, incoherent, ambiguous, and liminal embodiments, manifestations, and articulations of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions, bois of color can challenge the dehumanization they experience on the basis of their racialization and reclaim their humanity. The determinations of humanity for bois of color, and non-heterosexual Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color more broadly, can no longer rely on the colonial categories of gender and sexuality that were created to enact violence upon us. Colonial constructions of gender have historically and continue presently to be employed as the categorical basis from which to deny the humanity of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. When bois of color, purposefully or otherwise, reject these categories and forge and celebrate their own articulations of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions, they get closer to "that world in which all of our genders or lack thereof aren't used as the basis for our inhuman treatment" (Ziyad).

bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project: Community Organizations & Boi Politics

The rhizomatic nature of boihood allows for and celebrates the incoherent, illegible, and contradictory primary and secondary identifications employed by bois of color. These identifications vary between individual bois of color, and within and across community organizations as well. bklyn boihood (Brooklyn, New York) and The Brown Boi Project (Oakland, California) are two of the most prominent community organizations for bois of color in the United States. As with most community organizations, they are charged with the responsibility of defining who they serve. bklyn boihood's guiding principles state, "We commit to building a collective for self-identified genderqueer, gender non-conforming, two spirit, trans and transmasculine bois of color" (bklyn boihood). In a presentation detailing the organization's history, bklyn boihood writes that their community is composed of "masculine of center* bois, lesbians, queers, trans-identified, studs, doms, butches, and AGs of color" and "transmen [*sic*], tomboys, and queens" (The Bois). Through these namings of boi community, bklyn boihood inadvertently demonstrates the fluidity and ambiguity of boihood.

In recognition of the expansiveness of boihood, bklyn boihood's guiding principles express that "Our identities—that may or may not embody these 'labels'—overlap and live in unique spaces and that is beautiful.[10] We commit to building a collective in which we all are affirmed through honoring our complexity and need for space that may or may not include the entire collective" (bklyn boihood). This statement makes room for and celebrates the fluidity and complexity of self-identifications employed by non-heterosexual Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Additionally, bklyn boihood recognizes the simultaneous use *and* rejection of the labels they use to describe their community by the

organization's members, and honors these tensions rather than ignoring or erasing them. In doing so, they challenge colonial constructions of gender, sexuality, cis-ness, and trans-ness, as well as a strict definition of boihood. bklyn boihood also communicates the political potential of boihood, and stresses the importance of redefining masculinity, actively working against misogyny within and outside of the collective, and supporting women and girls of color in their communities. Through this work, they expand the notion of boihood as simply an identification of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions to connote an element of politics as well.

The Brown Boi Project also emphasizes the political potential of boihood. In the "About Us" section of their website, they write, "We prioritize support that improves the lives of masculine of center womyn, queer, and trans people of color; work that transforms the lives of women and girls; and introduces new alliances and tools for challenging racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia across our communities" (The Brown Boi Project). While their political goals have implications for women of color and non-heterosexual people of color more broadly, the organization's founder, B. Cole, provides more specificity about who in the organization does this work. In her article, "I Am a Brown Boi," she writes, "[The Brown Boi Project] brings together straight, transgender, queer, and bisexual men of color with masculine of center women to build a new vision for masculinity."[11] Similar to bklyn boihood, in naming these identities as constitutive of The Brown Boi Project community, Cole presents a fluid and expansive understanding of boihood; further, this naming destabilizes notions of cis-ness and trans-ness for its members and complicates "boi" as purely an identification of gender *or* sexuality.

bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project hold power in constructing mainstream narratives of boihood, especially when so few exist for and about bois of color. Both organizations make an intentional choice to use the language of "boi" and "boihood" in their titles as opposed to "masculine of center" or other terms, even as they recognize that they serve people who may not identify as bois. I believe that this choice points to the ability of "boi" to embody expansive, fluid, and flexible manifestations and articulations of sexual and romantic desires, gender/ed expressions, and politics. In naming the wide variety of terms of self-identification employed by the members of each organization, bklyn boihood and The Brown Boi Project do not claim to only serve people of a particular articulation of sexual and romantic desire, gender/ed expression, or gender(ed) presentation. The organizations present boihood as transcending strict definitions of gender, sexuality, cisgender, and transgender, and create an opportunity to reimagine the liberatory potentialites of sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions in conjunction with political beliefs and actions.

Conclusion

Throughout my article, I have centered my theorizations around Hari Ziyad's question in the epigraph: "How do we get to that end, that world in which all of our genders or lack thereof aren't used as the basis for our inhuman treatment?" What would it mean for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color to no longer be seen as failing colonial notions of gender, and to instead have their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions celebrated in all of their incoherent beauty? How can we reimagine determinations of humanity that do not rely on inextricably intertwined hierarchies of racialized gender/ed expressions? Considering Ziyad's inquiry leaves me with more questions than answers, but I believe that we must start here to imagine the liberatory potentialities of naming and self-identification. In asking ourselves these questions, we can begin to bring our liberation "that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" to our current moment in space-time (Muñoz 9).

In my interview with Cameron, they emphasized the necessity of dismantling colonial constructions of gender, gender/ed expectations, and gender(ed) roles in the liberation of Black people. They also pointed to the liberatory potentialities of gender, and the inherent interconnectedness between race and gender. I include the following quotes from our conversation to stress the importance of their statements, and to once again highlight the ways that the failure to adhere to colonial constructions of gender serves as the basis of dehumanization for all Black people:

> I think Black folks could have an even deeper understanding of what liberation could look like for our community if we had those conversations around gender, the ways in which gender has confined us and the ways it can liberate us now (Cameron).

> The gender roles we have now are manifestations of white supremacy and patriarchy… You can't limit liberation just to the context of race. Oppression doesn't work like that… So when we talk about dismantling racism and dismantling white supremacy, we also have to dismantle the white expectations of femininity, the white expectations of masculinity… [and] the white expectations [of] black masculinity. Those narratives that have either been fed to us or were created as a manifestation of slavery. All of those have to be destroyed in order for us to be really free… even down to how we express ourselves emotionally… Breaking down these societal constraints are also a part of Black liberation (Cameron).

Cameron's statements demonstrate how all Black people can achieve liberation and reclaim their humanity through the destruction of colonial conceptions of gender and sexuality, and their corollary understandings of masculinity, femininity, and emotionality. As colonial constructions of

gender have gendered many elements of our being, it is essential to reimagine what our sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions mean for our bodies, emotions, cultures, and spiritualities. We must reconstruct these meanings on our own terms, and without creating hierarchies or developing categories from which violence can be enacted when deviated from.

As Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color continue to name their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions in ways that are incoherent and illegible to the co-constitutive hierarchies of racialized gender/ed expressions and humanity instituted and upheld by slavery and colonization, we will move closer to liberation. Namings such as "boi" do not rely on these hierarchies, and therefore allow us to reimagine the liberatory potentialities of self-identification that move us away from and cause damage to colonial constructions. The processes and legacies of slavery and colonization place the sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions of Black people and Indigenous people as inferior to the cisgender and heterosexual identities of European colonizers and their descendants. Furthermore, this notion of inferiority was employed to construct a hierarchy of "humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye 8). If Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color no longer conceptualize or articulate their sexual and romantic desires and gender/ed expressions through the rubric of white manhood and white womanhood, then white supremacy loses its grip on the determinations of our humanity; it can no longer rely on the power of the categories it created to enact violence upon and dehumanize us. This brings us one step closer to "that world in which all of our genders or lack thereof aren't used as the basis for our inhuman treatment" (Ziyad). Until we reach that world, let us celebrate the resistance of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, and our beautiful, illegible, and incoherent ways of loving each other.

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Notes

1 Throughout this paper, I use the phrase "Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color" to refer to people who have been designated as non-white through the processes and legacies of slavery and colonization in (what is now known as) the United States. I distinguish between Black people and Indigenous people and other people of color (such as Asian people, non-white Latinx people, and people from the Pacific Island region) to recognize the differing experiences of racialization between these groups, as well as the specificities of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms.

2 I include *testimonio* here as a gesture to the political and community building work done by The Latina Feminist Group. In their book, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, they write, "*Testimonio* has been critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community. The 'second wave' feminist movement honored women's stories and showed how personal experience contains larger political meaning" (The Latina Feminist Group 3, author's emphasis).

3 I employ the phrase "sexual and romantic desires" rather than "sexuality" to avoid (as much as possible) the use of terms and concepts that have emerged from the processes of slavery and colonization, and that were created with the specific purpose of enacting violence upon Black people and Indigenous people. I drew inspiration for this phrasing from David Valentine's use of "sexual desire" in "'I went to bed with my own kind once': The erasure of desire in the name of identity," as it recognizes the sexual and romantic desires of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color while avoiding reliance on the aforementioned colonial constructions. I use the term "gender/ed expression(s)" in place of "gender" to denote how certain expressions (of romantic and/or sexual desires, culture, spirituality, etc.) were gendered by European colonizers. Colonial conceptualizations of "gender" at best fail to capture the experiences of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, and at worst act as the categorical basis from which exclusion, erasure, and violence occur.

4 I use the terms "cis-ness" and "trans-ness" to denote the colonial conceptions of "gender" that (are said to) constitute the criteria of the identities "cisgender" and "transgender."

5 While I employ the language of "academic," I want to challenge the positioning of texts produced in the academy as "more important" or "more legitimate" than knowledges (in all formats) produced outside of and against the academy.

6 I employ José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "potentiality" to express my hope and belief that "boihood" can serve as an anti-colonial understanding of sexual and romantic desires and/or gender/ed expressions, as well as a re/imagining of the boundary between "cisgender" and "transgender," with the recognition that it has yet to manifest to its full potential. Muñoz writes, "Unlike a

possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (9).

7 As I use the language of "queer" throughout my paper, I consider Cathy Cohen's theorizations of the term in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?". She posits "queer" as in opposition to (hetero)normativity, rather than as positioned against heterosexuality (Cohen 24-26, 31, 35-36). Therefore, I recognize that "queer" embodies meanings and modes beyond simply another naming of homosexuality. I also want to acknowledge "queer" as a (reclaimed) slur employed against people who embody or are perceived to embody non-heterosexual sexual and romantic desires and non-"cisgender" gender/ed expressions. In regards to the terms "trans" and "transgender," I recognize that this terminology has emerged from colonial constructions of gender and sexuality, and that many Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color cannot fit into the cis/trans binary and/or choose to name their gender/ed expressions using other language. Additionally, many Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color are coercively assigned the label of "trans" due to their percieved deviance from gender norms. Lastly, I want to highlight that many Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color experience violence on the basis of their gender/ed expressions even if they do not identify as "trans" or "transgender."

8 The featured quotes have been edited for clarity and brevity, and all names of interview participants have been changed.

9 This can include body modification through hormone therapy, gender affirmation surgeries, plastic surgery, and/or makeup, changes in hairstyle, clothing, and voice tonation, and the use of items like binders, packers, and padded bras to draw attention to or divert attention from certain gendered body parts.

10 The specific labels that they refer to here are "self-identified genderqueer, gender non-conforming, two spirit, trans and transmasculine bois of color" (bklyn boihood).

11 Cole employs "masculine of center" to "recognize the breadth and depth of identity for lesbian/queer/women who tilt toward the masculine side of the gender scale and [include] a wide range of identities such as butch, stud, aggressive/AG, dom, tomboi, and trans-masculine."

Queer Manifesto

After June Jordan

Donna Gary

We wring the toxins from each other.
Blood sobs out of us,
And for the first time
A woman bleeding is a smile.

When we are overflowing,
In our own salt water,
We do not drown.
We teach eachother how to swim.
We make raft of pains' hollow body.
We sit plump like marrow,
safe in the bones of empty promises.

We make space
where the language we are born from does not.
Neighborhoods write themselves onto concrete.
Boystown, Andersonville, Greenwich Village,
The few new homes we recognize by name.
Filling a need, nursing the rough edges,
We sleep in the margins of loose leaf.

We ask to be called by new names
that wreak havoc on birth certificates
Shed genders
That are first steps and finishing touches on the home we
see in our ourselves

We already on verge of constant combustion
Even when our quantum status deems queer unruly,
We still fuel ecosystems.
Like Mother
in doo-rag, loose white t, straight white teeth,
As center of six children
Half Sunflower, Mississippi
Half molasses in a grin.

When strewn on a flat glass plane
Slipped under the itchy eyes of a telescope,
We dot the soft coat of deep space.
Our outstretched arms making constellations.

There go queer,
vast like universes' hips,
after 14 billion years of separating moon and planet.
Vast like the trek across hardwood floor living room,
With moon in suspense and auntie rocking chair stationed guard.

Whoever goes looking for queer just goes looking for truth.
The gayest sight here is the sun,
Sneaking back into bed on a school night,
Holding its breath.

Pulsing under a clouds left breast.
Queer is feathered wind before dew drop hits leaf.

Is the skies yawn, wet and slick and okay to dream about.

The silence unraveling between two tongues.
the upwards trek home made flat by comrades.
the solidarity between a shoulder and a stranger.

the bars of a cage sighing and stretching backwards and open.

the healed wound from being called what you won't answer.

the sound of windchimes in a mouth you call home.
It is so familiar to you.
It is never wrong
It is never wrong.

Artist's Statement

Donna's "Queer Manifesto, After June Jordan" explores Queer as another name for a place of healing, as a home, as not enough, and as interstellar. This poem is after June Jordan because Donna was deeply moved and inspired by the structure of Jordan's "Poem About My Rights." Jose Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* was the first time Donna had ever heard of utopia in a way that was accessible to someone like her. It was the first of many interactions where she felt encouraged to consider queer a realm worthy of utopia in itself. In this way, Muñoz's work, was part of a larger moment and process of academic and collegiate access to queer theory and poetics. For Donna, queer is where she and others feel can comfortable together.

She addresses queer not only as a name, or place but also as space made, to live and thrive in. This exploration of queer is in opposition to constricting tendencies, naming, or categorizations Donna has explored in the past for herself. Donna's manifesto does not evade nuance, acknowledging the ways that even re-naming and re-claiming can sometimes feel futile. After noting how refreshing and complete naming as queer folks can feel, she recognizes the weight of fear, of "constant combustion," and the stress of "fueling ecosystems," queer folks may endure. A name may not feel like enough at times. In "Queer Manifesto," Donna offers up the universe as a backdrop for the home that queer has made, to attempt to articulate how vast her and the world's queer community is outside of just her or Earth. In one moment, Donna contextualizes queer in space, surrounded by other forms of matter that have boggled the minds of humans; the moon and the planets. There, queer is as old as time, and deserves its place in history as what has crafted the world as we know it.

Donna Gary *is an African American femme queer poet from Chicago's Humboldt Park and Chatham hoods. She is currently studying at NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Her working concentration focuses on the Poetics of Embodiment; The Ways Marginalized Folks (Re)Imagine Their Value Through Poetics. She is an events intern at New Women Space in Brooklyn, NY. She has performed with the Goodman Theatre and NYU Slam poetry teams on stages like The Metro, The Poetry Foundation and The Nuyorican Poets Cafe.*

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The Diasporic Politics of Accented Cinema

Negotiating Nation-State in Deepa Mehta's Fire

Rishi Gunė

Abstract

In 2013, the Indian Supreme Court reversed the 2009 decision by the Delhi High Court to legalize homosexuality. As of today, homosexuality is still illegal. Activists are continuing the fight for legal recognition, yet it is an uphill battle due to widespread societal homophobia. Queerness remains a taboo for many people, and an unspeakable subject for many families. Despite the social stigma, 17 years prior to the 2013 ruling Deepa Mehta produced a film called *Fire* (1996) about a love story between two queer Indian women (Radha and Sita) and their process of relinquishing their family for their relationship. Upon its release in India, the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party boycotted the film, saying homosexuality had no place in the country, and was a Western invention. Despite the political backlash, the film interrogates queer Indian women's ability to challenge compulsory heterosexuality in Indian society, and by extension, explore queer people's place within the postcolonial Indian national imaginary. This paper argues that the film's depiction of Radha and Sita's relationship works to delegitimize the traditional heteronormative ways the Indian postcolonial nation came to represent Indian women in society and thereby come to understand itself. In doing so, Mehta's work illuminates how Indian queer people's naming processes transcend linguistic borders.

keywords: belonging, queerness, sexuality, postcolonial nation state, media representations

> I knew I had to make a film about India because that is where I spent my formative years… I come from a generation of Indians who went to British schools, had British headmistresses, grew up speaking English and listening to the Rolling Stones… But this is now so passe in India, because Indians have such an incredible sense of their own identity. They don't need the things that made them a colonial or ex-colonial country. Everything we are as a traditional society is being questioned (Ingrid).
>
> —*Deepa Mehta, Now Magazine, 1996*

Moments of discovery, in which impossible desires become known, often work to challenge the very ideological foundations of the postcolonial nation-state. In challenging its legitimacy, moments of discovery where subjects name their "queerness" question the heteronormative status quo of majoritarian society. As a filmic text, *Fire* has lasting implications that point to the possibility claiming a queer identity has to account for the queer imaginary in the Indian nation. By offering the potential to reconfigure the very definitions that inform women's belonging and normativity in India, the film's depiction of Radha and Sita's relationship creates new realms of possibility for Indian queer subjects to exist and thrive beyond the confines of socially prescribed heteronormativity. This paper will work to chart that negotiation by mapping out the ways Mehta mitigates this process from to her positionality as a diasporic filmmaker.

By challenging the societal assumption of Indian women's heteronormativity, the film works to chart new modes of negotiating experiences of national belonging by queer women. Disrupting widely held social mores of the Indian Hindu majority regarding the domesticity of Hindu wives in the private sphere of the home, *Fire* challenges the ways in which Indian society figures Indian women into nationalist discourses and filmic representation. It upsets the unquestioned sanctity of the postcolonial nation-state through its depiction of queer love between two Indian women who choose to live life on their own terms, outside the confines of religious and social traditions, as well as institutions like marriage (Hogan 248). In claiming an identity that is culturally "nameless" and "unidentifiable," the film's protagonists chart a new future for themselves beyond the conscriptions of heteronormativity (Hogan 248).

Due to the high level of ethnic, religious, and sociocultural diversity amongst Indian citizen-subjects, media systems like film informed the national imaginary of India by representing it as a cohesive nation (Virdi 7). As Deepa Mehta's quote at the beginning emphasizes, this nationalist media-centered project worked in that it created a strong, if essentialized, national identity— "Indian." Throughout its history in India, the parameters this invented "cohesive" national identity used to grant citizen-subjects membership to the imagined community of the Indian nation was contingent upon fitting into majoritarian modes of belonging that continue to be deeply heterosexual and patriarchal (Gayatri 53). Nationalist discourse framed a dichotomous distinction between "modern" and "tradition," in which "modern" was associated with the West and the material, while tradition was associated with "the feminine domain of the native and the spiritual, hence the space of cultural difference" (Desai 163). Women and their bodies came to be inscribed as bearing not only the traditions and cultures of their respective communities, but also the future of the nation itself. Women became archetypes for the nation. Jigna Desai explains: "women's interests were collapsed with the interests of the nation (161) … Within the colonial and national context, national independence marked bourgeois women as home, nation, and spirituality" (147). Through this

process of marking social roles, Indian women found themselves living lives of social obligation, with preordained duties and little self-determination. Through this process, colonial European notions of the cult of domesticity became manifest in postcolonial governance and legal code. Consequently, citizen-subjects who are not afforded a place within the Indian national community on the grounds of gender, class, caste, ethnicity or sexuality must negotiate a new path for themselves in the public sphere of the nation. Media thus worked to representationally establish—and by extension, name—those who belonged and those who did not (190.)

In exploring the discursive measures of citizen-subject formation in Indian postcoloniality, it is important to first locate the postcolonial Indian nation-state's utilization of nationalism to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality by marking women's bodies as bearers of a national cultural identity and a national future as the producers of progeny (Desai 159). Through this symbolic seat at the table of the Indian national imaginary, Indian women become characterized as chaste and virtuous mothers (Desai 158). Within this ideological locale Indian women find themselves in, Indian women's behavior and sexuality is controlled in both the public and private spheres by socially held traditional values articulated as compulsory heterosexuality, often expressed as women being forced to contend with the resulting patriarchal dominance present within marital relationships (Desai 159).

Often in India, this space of negotiation occurs within the filmic medium, where film becomes a tool that informs, and thus reshapes, national identity along gender lines (Desai 190). Filmic representations in popular cinema often depicted an essentialized version of Indianness through character archetypes and plots predicated upon compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy, in which Hinduism, and its religious and cultural traditions, figured prominently (Desai 162). Films distinguish those who belong to the nation and those who do not through the metaphor of the family as nation (190). Jyotika Virdi explains the centrality of the family in discourses of the national in popular Indian cinema: "Hindi cinema is unique in using the family as the primary trope to negotiate caste, class, community and gender divisions, making for complex but decipherable hieroglyphics through which it configures the nation and constructs a nationalist imaginary" (7).

Representing the family as nation in Hindi popular cinema makes clear the reality of gender divisions operating at the level of representation that inform national politics:

> Gender trouble creates tensions, revealing cracks not only in heterosexual relations but also in national politics. The roles of hero and heroine, pivotal in all popular film, are central to ideas about femininity and masculinity in the making of the Indian nation. Plotting gender against the axes of heterosexuality, family, class, community, and nation is a useful hermeneu-

> tic device. By decoding gender signification in the symbolic realm—in the imaginary—gender inequalities became further entrenched. Male economic advantage in the public sphere continued in the private sphere, while discriminatory laws against women's rights in the family were enshrined in the new constitution (Gopinath 12).

Yet, Mehta turns this representational motif on its head by using the family to represent tradition as a form of repression that affects Hindu women's lives. In "Homo on the Range: Queering Postcoloniality and Globalization in Deepa Mehta's Fire," Jigna Desai argues that "*Fire* illuminates how contemporary postcolonial and transnational cultural discourses articulate racialized, classed, sexualized, religious, and gendered forms of social regulation and normalization" (Desai 159). She explores how *Fire* negotiates between modernity and tradition within postcolonial India in its presentation of queer love in a globalized context. Through the film's depiction of Indian women having a choice in how they will lead their lives, Desai states that "Sexuality is the site of the reformulation of the postcolonial bourgeois subject in globalization" (Desai 190). By moving away from tradition and towards each other, Radha and Sita point to a globalized future in which same-sex couples can live freely (Desai 190).

Of course, this process of imagining new futures does not necessarily need to occur within the confines of national borders, as diasporic and exilic movements of filmmakers force them to navigate their host countries while longing for the purity and sanctity of the homeland (Naficy 182). The forces that inform this diasporic sense of nostalgia for the "pure" homeland in the Indian nation can oftentimes challenge state-sanctioned filmic portrayals of characters and subject matter by attending to the many cultural differences that become apparent upon a closer inspection of regional, linguistic, religious, and caste differences across the subcontinent (Naficy 282). Diasporic filmmakers like Deepa Mehta attend to these differences by depicting alternative ways for Indian women to negotiate the traditional values that shape their lives and their membership to the nation. By using the filmic medium to depict these alternative ways of living, she is effectively showing queer Indian people that people like them exist, and are surviving, regardless of family issues and repressive traditional values.

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) operates transnationally within this space of negotiation. Produced with North American and Indian backing, the film is an account of queer love between two middle-class urban Hindu women, Radha and Sita, who are sisters-in-law living with their husbands and mother-in-law in a joint family in Delhi. In locating queer desire in the confines of the bourgeois home, *Fire* illuminates alternative ways for Indian women to express their sexuality and inhabit their private lives. Traditionally, women had limited access to the public sphere, living lives devoted to fulfilling their domestic roles as wives and mothers (Virdi 16).

By inscribing queer love between Hindu women into the public arena of spectatorship, Mehta's film draws attention to the shortcomings of the postcolonial nation state by shifting the attendant dichotomous divide between the private domestic spheres of women and the public male spheres of the nation-state itself (Desai 162). The home diegetically represented in the film comes to symbolize the nation, and the attendant tension between tradition and modernity that India was in the midst of during the 1990s, a decade marked by globalization (Randoja).

As her interview at the beginning suggests, the pressing threat facing India is not a question of national identity; instead, it revolves around the continued reevaluation of the importance of the social credence of cultural and religious traditions in guiding postmodern life. The film demands that Indian citizen-subjects question the ways in which traditional values inform national belonging by depicting two women's process of falling in love and rejecting the confines of traditional values. As Mehta's quote at the beginning legitimates, a strong desire to return to the homeland and depict her people marked her desire to make *Fire*, and thus articulates her positionality as a diasporic filmmaker since her diasporic experience shaped her transnational film projects. Mehta's statement reifies Appadurai's critique that center-periphery models of diasporic relationships between—in the case of India—non-resident Indians, and Indians still located within the national borders of the homeland, fail to account for the nuance of diaspora as a form of transnational migration (468).

Gayatri Gopinath draws from Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy to define a more nuanced idea of diaspora: "a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (7). Gopinath's argument centers around her notion of "queer diaspora," which she presents as subverting the heteronormative implications of national imaginaries. She begins by describing how diaspora has historically functioned in opposition to the nation, and the nationalism that lies within its borders. Historically, diaspora has been deeply connected to the nation, and has been markedly heteronormative, as evidenced by the implications of the diaspora's need to create progeny to ensure cultural and generational continuance (Gopinath 8). Hence, the notion of queerness has been placed in opposition to the nation-state paradigm. Gopinath's use of queer refers to "a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may well be incommensurate with the identity categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian'" (11). Thus, "Suturing 'queer' to 'diaspora' thus recuperates those desires, practices and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and national imaginaries" (Gopinath 11). She incorporates "queer diaspora" into her analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, stating that:

> The film and the controversy it engendered demand that we explore more fully the ways in which challenges to state-sanctioned sexual subjectivities are managed within hegemonic

> articulations of community and nation, and how they simultaneously threaten to interrupt the coherence of such entities (Gopinath 139).

Through the framework of "queer diaspora," Gopinath argues that *Fire* offers the analytic potential to explore the ways in which sexual subjectivities that lie outside of state-sanctioned normativity are repressed by the postcolonial state (139). In analyzing this repression, Gopinath highlights the difficulty queer Indians experience in naming their identities.

By choosing to use lesbianism as a way for women to find solidarity with each other and reject tradition, Mehta's film illuminates how queer women in India come together to create their own worlds. In a society with legal and social barriers against full inclusion of queer subjects, *Fire* illuminates that it is possible to move beyond such strictures to create communities where queer people can live their truth. The film forges a multifaceted view of identity, where exemplars Radha and Sita move past the de facto heteronormative script to focus on their desire for each other. This desire is what propels them from their husbands. It is a known desire that doesn't have a name, but it's powerful. Both women exist together, weaving their queer imaginaries into the tapestry of the Indian nation.

Hamid Naficy describes accented filmmakers like Deepa Mehta's ability to inform and participate in this commentary of the nation-state: "They [accented films] signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers" (4). This critique is often forged in the filmic diegesis by way of representational elements like imagery, light, and mise-en-scène in which stylistic choices, like locating accented films in the claustrophobic home, work to convey the filmmaker's own sentiments of displacement and/or longing for the homeland (Naficy 6). Via a textual analysis of the film, I argue that *Fire* is indeed accented, exemplified by Mehta's utilization of stylistic elements like color and lighting that directly critique the repression and masculinity of Hindu traditions. *Fire*'s accent maps out the failures of the nation-state project in general, and the Indian nation itself, by using the home, the utmost symbol of women's purity and devotion in the Indian national imaginary, as the site of queer romance, which stresses that the nationalist project's use of compulsory heteronormativity is deeply oppressive to people who exist outside of this dominant sexuality. These thematic and image-based representations in the film challenge the unquestioned sanctity of the postcolonial nation-state due to Mehta's depiction of queer love between two Indian women who eventually choose to live life on their own terms, outside the confines of religious and social traditions and institutions like marriage. Thus, Radha and Sita shift from non-agentic figures to women actively claiming their agency as citizen-subjects in the Indian nation.

By placing filmic representations of queerness in the private sphere of the home, Mehta challenges women's traditional role in the family, and thus in the nation. In the same interview from *Now* magazine, Mehta states:

> The women's relationship represents modern India itself… Radha is tradition-bound and just waiting to blossom, but can't because of the absurdity of tradition and duty. Sita is modern India, desiring independence over tradition. Yet it's not as if she can speak her mind. She's simply a catalyst, so when she walks into the house, she makes things happen just by her presence (Randoja).

Here, she is renaming the historic amalgams that have routinely harnessed Hindu women and their bodies in the service of motherhood, domesticity, docility, culture, and tradition. The apparent backwardness of Hindu traditions becomes inscribed in Radha and Sita's clothes. Their bodies become the interlocutors of, in Mehta's view, the most pressing issue facing the Indian nation—Hindu women's placement at the center of the tension between modernity and tradition. She uses "visual markers of difference and belonging (posture, look, style of dress and behavior)" to map out both women's role as traditional wives (Naficy 18). Consistently clad in saris, only Sita—the catalyst of their shared decision to rebuff traditional values—slips out of her traditional clothing and into Western men's clothes like jeans, which helps solidify her role as personifying the modernizing forces of India. Hogan's analysis of Mehta's use of visual patterns of colors and lightness and boundary emphasizes how the film represents both the repressive aspects of conservative Hinduism and the role it has played in determining women's roles in the family, and by extension, the nation (Hogan 229). This patterning supports his main assertion: "the only peaceful future for India lies in the union of its women, their rejection of a patriarchal tradition that is bound up with political and economic oppression, sexual repression, violence, and communalism" (Hogan 239).

In terms of lighting, Mehta reverses the notion of associating "good" with light and "bad" with darkness (Hogan 246). Instead, she associates whiteness and brightness with disgust and repression (Hogan 246). Throughout the film, Mehta uses key lighting where the main lighting source corresponds to a logical source of light in the frame. A fill light maps out important features, like a character's visage. Cascades of white bright and ephemeral light often fall on Biji, the mother of both women's husbands, who upholds tradition. Hogan explains:

> The radiance recalls the miraculous events that the Sanskrit-theorists connected with wonder. In these and other cases, the diffuse light suggests a sort of spiritual reverence, a reverence for morality [and] a reverence for ancient tradition, of which

> Biji is almost a personification. But in each case there is something deeply wrong (244).

Yet, when Radha and Sita come together, Mehta stops using the fill light. Whether during intimate embraces or dances to Bollywood songs, both women occupy a space of darkness, which Hogan believes "communicates intimacy and an affirmation of life" (246). Darkness comes to be "associated with love and forbidden sexuality" (Hogan 246). In reframing brightness as a symbol of death and darkness as a site of new imaginings of the self, Mehta emphasizes accented film's capacity to: "signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism" (Naficy 5). The imperfections of darkness become a realm for queer love to prosper, thereby disrupting tradition and women's role within society by working to rename new modes of existence .

Consistently, Radha and Sita wear green and orange saris throughout the film. In the film's most affective romantic scene in which both women first come together in sexual union, Hogan describes Mehta's use of color: "Radha is wearing orange. Sita is wearing green. The white sheets are between them. The configuration vividly recalls an Indian flag" (Hogan 239). The Indian flag, the ideological symbol of the Indian nation, represents Hinduism as orange, Islam as green and white as the unifying force between them (Hogan 236). The union they find in each other points to the potential women finding solidarity in each other has in postulating alternative futurities for India, in which Radha and Sita's bodies represent Hindu and Muslim national communities (Hogan 236). Thus, their bodies and the clothes they are adorned with function symbolically to point to the very real oppression queer Indian women experience (Hogan 237).

Mehta's stylistic choice to engrave the flag symbolically on Radha and Sita's clothing is important as it reflects her critical stance concerning the false promises, and failures, of the Indian nation-state in interfering with Indian queer communitie's ability to name themselves. By resignifying the national flag—the symbol of the imagined community of India—onto the bodies of two women in love who refuse their traditional duties, Mehta envisions India as a nation-state in which all minorities, including same-sex couples, can take part in the bounty of the nation (Hogan 237). Instead of creating non-agentic characters that archetypically represent Indian women, Mehta uses the connection of both women to imagine a future that exists outside of the repressive nature of tradition. She disrupts the colonial and nationalist rhetoric that has defined "good" Indian women by their dedication to the home, tradition, and spirituality (Virdi). Through filmic representations and nationalist discourse, this rhetoric framed Indian women's citizenship as being contingent upon their ability to uphold traditional values (Virdi). Mehta drastically shifts this discourse by locating both characters in a globalized world in which they discover

they themselves can shape their own lives. In telling this particular story, Mehta creates a filmic representation of queer repression in India that fits within Gopinath's notion of queer diaspora. By "'demanding the impossible,'" she "points to the failure of the nation to live up to its promises of democratic egalitarianism, and dares to envision other possibilities of existence exterior to dominant systems of logic" (Gopinath 21). In manifesting the impossible, Radha and Sita do not need a word to describe what they are; rather, by being together without hesitation they challenge the status quo by daring to imagine a future where their relationship is a non-issue.

Being a diasporic filmmaker, Mehta subverts the ideologically upheld heteronormative and patriarchal representation of women in mainstream popular Indian cinema. This capacity for subversion is a constitutive feature of Radha and Sita's naming process, a process reflected in the mise-en-scène, characterization and artistic choices Mehta made in production. Through her representation of queer Indian women, she is creating agentic figures who lead lives of their own. They are no longer repressed by the oppressive forces of religious and spiritual customs, institutionalized by the postcolonial Indian nation-state. Radha and Sita can thus lead a life of free choice. By illuminating new ways for women to live their lives, Mehta emphasizes the stifling role tradition plays in guiding one's life. As a diasporic filmmaker, Mehta's depiction of queer love within the Indian nation-state works to challenge the ways in which belonging is understood by framing a story that is often erased or sidelined in the name of majoritarian "keyword" social institutions that privilege a male, Hindu, heteronormative and patriarchal perspective. In doing so, she articulates the difficulty queer people experience as they attempt to live and name a non-heterosexual life.

Mehta's subversive politicization of the home as an erotic and queer space is emphasized in the film's climax. After being discovered by Ashok, Radha and Sita plan their escape. As they speak to each other they say the following:

SITA: Now listen Radha—there is no word in our language to describe what we are, how we feel for each other.
RADHA: Perhaps you're right, seeing is less complicated (*Fire*).

As the lines quoted above show, Radha and Sita cannot latch on to the "homosexual" modern identity. There is no community to search for, only the love they share for each other. Only the sight of their respective lover. In their worldview, represented through language, their queerness is an aspect of their humanity—not the summation of their existence. There is no word for their relationship because what they have is something that occurs in the shadows, in revelatory secret. To onlookers like their husbands, what they have between each other is taboo, a viewpoint underscored when Ashok discovers the truth about their relationship.

At this moment of discovery, Radha and Sita see that the time has come to find their way in the world together. Radha lets Sita go first, because she wants to have a final talk with her husband. As they begin to argue, she fervently rejects any duty she has as Ashok's wife, and tells him that she is leaving with Sita. In the ensuing commotion, Radha's sari catches on fire, and Ashok saves Biji instead of helping her. In Hogan's view, this scene symbolically represents the male Hindu establishment's preference to preserve tradition—symbolized by Ashok's removal of his mother—at the cost of women's well-being (Hogan 247). Despite his actions, Radha still remains resolute in her decision to refuse compulsory heterosexuality and go forth into the world with her lover. In doing so, *Fire* shows the power decisions have in forming a queer identity. There is no word for the love they share—yet Radha and Sita are willing to risk everything because what they have goes beyond words.

Upon *Fire*'s release in India in 1998, the censor board changed Sita's name to Nitha to avoid any connections to the deeply respected Hindu religious figure of the same name. Regardless, the Hindu nationalist group Shiv Sena violently boycotted the film, saying that its depiction of lesbian love was vulgar, and threatened to undermine the very institution of marriage itself. During its reception, the outcry *Fire* created reflected the majoritarian notions of normativity and national belonging that were conspicuously heterosexual and patriarchal. Yet, despite these widely-held beliefs, it is important to understand that queer Indians do exist. Regardless of caste, class, religion, ethnicity or gender, all citizen-subjects deserve equal civil rights and positive media representation. In India, homosexuality is still illegal, and queer people are continually victimized by police brutality, familial rejections, and constant violence. Slowly but surely, queer people are coming into a communitarian mindset, as seen in the recent Pride Parades and widespread activism regarding LGBTQ rights that have occurred since the 2009 decision to keep homosexuality illegal. Today, people claim their truths, as English words for queer identities become incorporated into Indian languages.

With this reality in mind, Deepa Mehta's film maps out imagined possibilities of queer people falling in love, making clear that words used to identify homosexuality are not always necessary. Through her perspective as a diasporic filmmaker, *Fire*'s accent reflects the potential dreams of equality have in re/shaping and re/membering an Indian nation predicated upon the strength and solace that women find with each other. By reconfiguring the ways in which women's roles are named and lived within Indian society, Mehta moves away from heteronormative social values in India that restrict Sita and Radha's ability to live lives of their own choosing. Thus, in Hogan's words:

> The [film's] suggestions go beyond the personal condition of these two characters to India as a nation, to its sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities, to its women, to all groups that suffer

> from a tradition of patriarchal violence and repression, thus to all groups that might find hope in a dark and boundless imagination of unimagined possibilities (249).

Rishi Gunė *(Vassar '17) is a painter and writer living in sunny Southern California. Rishi was active in the LGBTQ community during their time on campus, becoming the President of Queer Coalition of Vassar College during their last year and half at Vassar. Rishi hopes to go on to graduate school to study how nationalism and the nation-state inform processes of belonging for (queer and trans) communities of color. They hope to make films and clothes, sing and write novels in the near future in between creating scholarship.*

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A REST

Jennifer Vela

sometimes I feel like a dragon,
shaking head, teeth barred
attuned to the pliancy of fire,
heat pockets like the press
of mountains on soil, boulders
resting in dirt. A touch on skin.

I think I am listening—open
open, open—to solar flares, reds
and oranges and pinks refracting
through sun rays, the withering
of parsley leaves in strong light,
yellow, holding heat in plant fibers.

everything is so soft, specific—
flames too harsh and leaves ash,
white, chalky, a memory.
I am clumsy, magnificent, lonely—
listening to colors bend and warm,
creaking deep in my skin.

still since birth, gentle and heaving
you wish to split open dragon eggs
make me nothing before I am something
thunder unheard, floating in clear skies.

sometimes I am bathed in fire,
enough to sear and blur the fear.
stop hating me for setting fires,

stop hating me for my communion with the sun,
too painful and soft for you to hear.
I could flare wings and open to the sun,
or say that I am autistic.

Where do you place poems about the trees,
chlorophyll, and roots in Earth,
before they are diagnosed?

Just let me listen, be still
like stones in desert brush,
until you too can feel the cicadas murmur
through the heart pulses of the ground.

the heat and fire in the dirt
rise to feel brown skin, warm to the touch,
shaking from the hum of a heart underneath.

Artist's Statement

Content Warning: brief non-graphic mention of death and debility, "cure" discussion, personal experiences of disability, sensory shutdowns, trauma, and racism.

There are a lot of things I can't do. Places with bright lights and loud noises overwhelm me quickly, I go quiet in large groups, and when I am required (or I choose) to push past my limits, I experience painful semi/non-verbal shutdowns. That said, accepting my limitations and experiences of psychiatric disabilities as inherent and beautiful has been transformative for me. Much of my sensitivity and signifiers of disability I first loved within my capacity as a poet. This includes my sensitivity to sensory stimuli. It includes my tendency to sound like a thesaurus, called being "hyperlexic" or what for me is an intense sensitivity to words. And it includes getting lost while searching for words. These capacities made me good at poetry, I thought, and I internalized them with my identity as poet.

However, when I was no longer being able to produce poetry, because of trauma and limited linguistic capacity or spoons, I had to figure out what this meant for me. I was also simultaneously challenging how and why my poetry had been rewarded, a part of which included upholding white standards and aesthetics of literature. Lately through being subject to similar processes, however, I've realized I was also rewarded for the openness of my pain. I learned to tell everything and expose all of my emotions. Now that I am creating boundaries and healing, I have a new understanding of being consumable as a disabled racialized Chicana, Latina, and a lesbian.

As a Chicana, working through disability and language has been a lot of contextualizing. I needed to situate violence within myself, within my family, and then within larger processes of exploitation, migration, and generational differences. Understanding how I am racialized has let me locate and continue to locate the power and violence I move with, as a Mexican person who has no ties to indigeneity or blackness and benefits from colonialism and anti-blackness. As a Latina, disability has connected me to knowledge and wisdom I did not actively acknowledge. As a lesbian, among and with these other categories, I prioritized care, communication, and slowness in my relationships. I provided this labor for my white part-

ners toward accessibility, and received very little myself. My poetry was always beautiful and so "very emotional" to them, too.

A lot of my thinking revolves around my family, specifically my mom, my tía Laura, and my grandma. I first learned from them what it means and looks like to not be able to do something, and have no one believe you. They inspire me to reposition disability as normal, care work as valuable, and accessibility labor as a necessary and vital part of relationships. It is always work, but it is always necessary. I've turned to Anzaldúa and Lorde and learned disabled or sick lesbians of color have done and will continue to do this work and resist alienation from their bodies. Some choose to reject disability labels and resist medicalization, and I'm still negotiating my relationship to the word "autistic."

My favorite thing to do is imagine what my experiences could mean before, and after, pathologization. Could I be a sense-speaker? I ask in my poem "Where do you place poems about the trees… before they are diagnosed?" This is a way I am thinking about my capacities that signify disability, as I first used them in an intelligible way for poetry, Also, however, I've struggled with questions of who is exploited to provide this work and who are usually the beneficiaries. I've found relevant thought in disability/crip justice work, and what some people are naming crip of color critique. Some of my new questions include who is dying, who experiences debility and why, and what experiences are configured with inherent debility?

The first time I went nonverbal I had no words to describe the experience (that was word play), and was more surprised than anything else. Also, I unexpectedly caused profound distress and fear to the people I was around. It is an expected response when someone you care about is in pain and you are not able to help. I can acknowledge this, the labor others did for me, and my need for nonverbal states as not in contradiction or opposition to each other, but requiring careful navigation. Language is complicated, especially when there are multiple structural forces shaping your experience of it. Among my experiences of language, this includes (pathologized) nonverbal states. It includes that Spanish feels like home. And it includes that I've been told I will write less well because I'm a Latina, so navigating these experiences has required knowledge from many places. Communication is a specific form of capacity, and forms of it have been constructed as superior to enact racist, colonialist, and disablist violence.

My poem, "a rest," tries to "communicate" autistic living, naming, and relationship to eugenics very briefly. My poem includes moments of synesthesia, or associating elements of one sense (such as visual understandings of color) with another sense (such as auditory understandings of sound). This sensitivity and association I understand as part of being autistic. Sensations are everything and nothing, overwhelming and gentle. I feel colors as soft or hard, and I hear sounds as bright or dull, "movements" of sensation that aren't linguistic but felt and written as something else entirely. No one thinks of "movement" in reference to autism, other than autistic people. Eugenics shapes autistic discourse, "advocating" for

cures or interventions, some way to stop the "silence" of shaking, rocking, stimming autistics. I reference this in my poem as wishing to "split open dragon eggs."

On the other hand, performing allistic (non-autistic) communication styles is a lot of work, so being autistic is "a rest." There are truly no words to describe non-verbal experiences. My poem attempts to describe this, but still lies within the realm of the verbal or textual. Jasbir Puar mentions that the inability to communicate "regulat[es] the human/animal distinction" through determining mental or cognitive impairment (156). Often language is considered the "most human of traits," a capacity unique and definitive of humanity. There are people who experience incapacities to read, to write, to speak. And any speech is also placed within this hierarchy, as agency, intelligibility, or "affect" is rendered il/legible according to structures of racism, homophobia, and disablism. My writing is "less good" because I'm a racialized Latina, illegible unless it follows patterns of limited prepositions. Illegible unless I use simpler words and eliminate the SAT thesaurus patterns that facilitated my entry into academia to begin with. My writing is illegible because it is "unclear." I've slowly experienced a reduction in my capacity for clarity, and am constantly engaging with both my fog and my understanding of to what degree other people have this fog. My writing is illegible as a lesbian as I write "love" and mean something unexplored, without rules, and something I am still trying to explore. Within academia, I am lucky to have some (if painful) capacity to write and maintain my status here. The legibility of such writing still, however, works along how easy it is to consume within these structures. What would cross-"communication" look like?

While comparisons of humans and animals have racist power, this is premised on the capacity of language and verbalizing these comparisons (Chen 51). As Mel Chen argues in *Animacies*, human and animal boundaries are imposed and enforced to organize a hierarchy of being and animacy, including notions of consciousness, and are materialized in how languages are constructed. These hierarchies of being and animacy create distinctions of "human." Chen interrogates comparisons between humans and animals, and how they reflect violent global histories and carry an enormous amount of racist violence (98). I second this argument, even as I individually attempt to understand and reclaim my experiences of disability. Disabled experiences are considered animal-like, and I've had people make comparisons about me before. I try to reclaim my experiences as animal-like, non-verbal, and in defiance of this hierarchy, and navigate those implications.

Chen describes a quality of agency and affect termed "animacy" that is attributed to beings through language and hierarchy (5). If locations in this hierarchy are assumed/assigned animacy, then listening to that location is not really something "people" do. As an autistic, I've waved to buses and talked to animals and "hear" things from beings that are assigned lower animacy. I try to explore animal-human boundaries through expe-

riences of not "communicating," and an ambiguous body of the speaker in my poem, "a rest." I am simultaneously dragon and brown body, my "stimming," or flaring of wings under the sun, an animal action rendering me inhuman, but still feeling warmth on brown skin.

I feel language in a way that's too intense and love my autistic way of producing "communication." I spend a lot of time discovering what is legible in allistic communication, and my poetry is part of that at times. Still, many times it hurts to speak, and not speaking is beautiful. There are possibilities withnot-speaking, stillness, silence that we have yet to open and explore.

Jennifer Vela *is a Latin American and Latino/a studies major at Vassar College. She likes romanticizing autism, disability studies, turtles, and trees.*

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Black Subjectivities in Bloom

The Prosumption of Afro-German Discourse after the 1980s

Stevie Gunter

Abstract
In determining the current state of Afro-German subjectivity, it is important to adopt a transnational feminist framework in order to theorize their lived-experiences in a country that ignores the socially constructed reality of race. The positionality of Queer Afro-German is most recognizably expressed and shared through performance art, poetry, and music. This essay seeks to illuminate the effects of being a queer Other in a country of one's own origin through a qualitative analysis of these forms following the 1980's, when Afro-German movements began to solidify. Anthologies and publications like *Farbe bekennen*, *Talking Home*, *Afrekete*, and others make the discourse and experience of this group accessible in terms of language, content, and the medium through which they were produced. The resulting explanation reveals that decentralized knowledge production has far-reaching effects on the way people can access and conceptualize queer Afro-German life due to the pervasive nature of Black American life in postwar Germany. Drawing upon Muñoz's theory of disidentification, the essay illustrates ways in which Afro-Germans have created a space for queer consciousness raising to occur by critiquing and improving existing practices. This essay is significant because illuminates the lack of intersectional research occurring in Germany specifically because of the German manifestation of color-blindness.

keywords: transnational feminism, disidentification, diaspora, epistemology, decolonial

Introduction

Globalization, according to Alexander and Mohanty, must occur in order for transnational discourse to emerge. Transnationalism describes how bodies can exist in the here/now simultaneously with the then/there, ultimately forcing us to adopt multiple perspectives at once to understand social phenomena (25). Knowledge shared between diasporic groups is inherently transnational despite these groups existing and developing in the Global North. As my analysis will look specifically at Black people in Germany after the 1980s, Alexander and Mohanty would agree that this theory's commitment to deconstructing neoliberal, capitalist logics is useful for understanding the Afro-German condition (38). Namely, how the

production of knowledge while being Black in Germany has implications for destabilizing the academic-public binary. However, since this information is being produced by marginalized groups, their epistemic privilege from this position grants them legitimacy especially outside of the university, but within the university as well. This location of knowledge production has the opportunity to be more subversive through its accessibility, becoming a more efficient vehicle for social change (Alexander and Mohanty 29).

Despite the condition of Black people in both the US and Germany, Black people in the US have been theorizing about their experiences both in and outside of the academy and have had that academic knowledge recognized, therefore we must acknowledge the kind of legitimacy that this knowledge is given in comparison to the kind produced outside of the academy. We must also acknowledge that US-centric information is privileged over others globally and this can reproduce the idea that American Blackness is somehow normative and Blackness outside of the context of the Middle Passage is deviant (El-Tayeb 45). Alexander and Mohanty would agree that feminist solidarity between the United States and Germany can look like teaching across these borders while being attentive to the distributions of power that exist for each group on a global, as well as local, scale, creating radical, transnational praxis (40). I wish to break this "epistemological contract" in order to ethically analyze Afro-German theorizing, despite it being heavily influenced by US Blackness (Alexander and Mohanty 41; El-Tayeb 65). The kind of theorizing that has cultivated Afro-German consciousness should be seen as decolonized primarily because it uses tools that are deeply disvalued by the Global North, like emotionality and queer subjectivity. Afro-German identity formation sprouts from US academic circles but blooms in the public; the production of knowledge is therefore transnational because it is location specific but not location bound (Alexander and Mohanty 28). This essay aims to name and deconstruct this process of creating hierarchies around Blackness by introducing Afro-Germans into the conversation; a multifaceted group which demonstrates transnational theories in praxis.

I will analyze an interview, poetry, and music by Afro-German people, but primarily Afro-German women. Additionally, I look at the use of humor in film and perspective in theatre to deconstruct how they function for a racially and ethnically diverse audience. A critical-constructivist approach is taken in analyzing these materials to prioritize subjective, qualitative data collection. The theoretical perspective from which I will be developing this essay will be transnationalism and Muñoz's theory of disidentification. I aim to describe the subversive nature of Afro-German identity formation and community building in order to provide a more efficient, ethical means of relating bodies across time and space, while decentering dominant logics of movement.

The scope of this research draws from digitally accessible primary and secondary materials as opposed to direct interviews or focus groups.

This is due to the limitation of funds and time. While the experiences of Afro-German people overall provides stable ground upon which these questions can be posed, I must also highlight that less visible Afro-German groups are not as abundant nor accessible for this research. Therefore, the biggest limitation to this work is the lack of more queer subject's perspectives.

Through building a foundation upon uncommon discursive practices, how is Afro-German identity formation a transnational process and how is it made accessible to queer populations? Self-identification and the use of autobiography in anthologies and publications facilitates cross-identity relationship building. Afro-German work being visible in pop culture automatically makes their discourse subversive. Thus, reasserting existence into both past and present German history confronts the spatio-temporal gaps in the collective history of Afro-Germans.

Afro-German knowledge production is located both within and outside of the nation, heavily influenced by other diasporic works and produced from these perspectives while also being consumed by people outside of the immediate Afro-German community, allowing it to infiltrate dominant discourses by reasserting their existence in the various spatio-temporal locations of Germany. Afro-German identity formation continues to bloom from its queer, artistic, transatlantic Black roots.

The Emergence of the Afro-German Movement

Black American theorizing during the second and third wave feminist movements heavily influenced the shape of the Afro-German movement. In 1984, Audre Lorde was invited by Dagmar Schultz, one of the writers of the seminal *Farbe bekennen*, to teach a course on African American women poets and to workshop poetry at the Free University of Berlin (Michaels 21). During that time, Lorde influenced other writers of *Farbe bekennen*, like May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye, who adopted her perspectives on the power and necessity of self definition and community building.

She saw autobiography as essential to securing social change, as it provided the marginalized with the power to name themselves and develop a language to characterize their situation. Although Lorde helped coin the term "Afro-German," this action should be seen as one that connects Afro-Germans diasporically with other hyphenated people of the diaspora (Michaels 25). Using this name in solidarity with other hyphenated groups not only connects them worldwide, but within Germany as well, and presents the opportunity for national community building to occur under one name. Thus, groups like the Initiative Schwarze Deutschland (ISD), or the Black Initiative Germany, and publications like *Onkel Toms Faust* and *afro look* began to grow with participation and recognition as legitimate points of consciousness raising (Michaels 26).

Disidentification was the primary mode through which Afro-German consciousness raising occurred, producing more inclusive national groups and literature. The main criticisms of national women's movements

was their lack of attention to race, which stemmed from Germany's post-war reluctance to perceive race while promoting anti-semitism, hetero-sexism, and xenophobia (Michaels 26). Additionally, questions of gender and sexuality went largely ignored within the flourishing Afro-German community due to internalized homophobia and sexism. Black queer Germans opted to organize a separate space to expand upon Black consciousness apart from both movements which had intended to be liberatory but instead manifested as exclusive. Therefore, they found it necessary to redirect the movement by aligning actions, practices, and discourse along both gender and racial lines. This ownership of agency and representation disrupts the cycles of power that produce subjectivity which reproduce those same heteronormative power structures (Bacchetta 264). Disidentifying is a survival strategy that mediates the sanctions non-normative individuals might receive when not operating within the limited definitions that would grant them space and recognition in either hegemonic spaces or even in groups intended for marginalized people (Muñoz 4).

This act of disidentification also helped to make the group Afro-Deutsche Frauen (ADEFRA) into one of the more inclusive spaces for the entirety of Afro-Germans. ADEFRA understands its role as essential to the Afro-German movement because it provides a safe space for women and gender nonconforming individuals to share knowledge and experiences while defining and exploring their own intersectional identities (Hernandez). They believe that the production of alternative knowledge influences action and the direction of social movements, using poetry and storytelling as tools of resistance (Kinder). Women of Color and Queer People of Color typically guide such creative constructions of alternative ways of living and theorizing, causing the products of these movements to be internally transnational (Bacchetta 277).

Both ISD and ADEFRA came into being in the mid-1980s, signaling a shift from simply defining the community to understanding the collective positions Afro-Germans might take on certain issues. With ADEFRA, inherently transnational, coalitional organizing around topics like health, sexuality, relationships, meaningful employment, political strategies, and alternative knowledge production moved to the forefront and allowed for the pursuit of self-knowledge to inform more long-term actions (Eggers 197). This separation was necessary in order to refine the focus around nuanced issues and give more control over the narrative to marginalized people by legitimizing subjective experience. It helped to facilitate the deconstruction of the dominant logics which permeated their socialization. This is most efficiently seen in the anthology, *Afrekete*, and the publication of *Farbe bekennen*.

Afrekete was created in order to aid Afro-German women and gender nonconforming people in exploring cultural identity and work out ways to combat racism and sexism (Michaels 26). It connects to the larger diaspora by including African and Black American heritages to the forming Afro-German heritage. Even the name itself, *Afrekete*, is supposed to repre-

sent a creative and destructive trickster who plays with various genders and identities and stems from Audre Lorde's use of it in her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Michaels 26).

Afrekete is described as having verbal dexterity, characteristically ambiguous in gender, erotic, unpredictable, and intelligent, being one of the deities who communicates both amongst the gods and between the gods and humans (Provost and Lorde 46). Lorde uses these complexities in her work to demonstrate her own command over language and power over identity in order to walk the boundaries, "becoming at once part of and yet not subsumed by various communities" (Provost and Lorde 49). Especially because of Lorde's role in the early stages of the Afro-German movement and its feminist practices leading into the 90s, embodying trickster traditions through associations with Afrekete allows the community the space to subvert language, identify with the liminal and multifaceted, and reclaim power through self definition.

Farbe bekennen became the seminal text from which Queer PoC critiques would sprout, threading the value of experience sharing and transnational discourse throughout the entirety of the movement. This book, published in 1986, uses transnational discursive strategies to place Black Germans within German history. It is a mosaic of poetry, interviews, history, and theory and places women at the forefront of the text (and, subsequently, the movement) by prioritizing their stories and experiences, while also being written by them. This combination of poetry and autobiography introduces a counter-memory discourse that directly defies the violent memory-erasing practices of the state (El-Tayeb 50).

Farbe bekennen is arranged dialogically instead of dialectically, which means that it places a greater significance on dialogue and the articulation of experience rather than positing ideas regarding identity in opposition to one another (Wright). This is transnational because it discourages constructing a hierarchy around Blackness, where most Black consciousness raising is done in relation to the Middle Passage and other displacement that stemmed from slavery as well as theorizing subjecthood around the Black male subject. It acknowledges women and queer individuals as subjects and recognizes movement in relation to various historical and cultural events. Finally, its use of personal narratives and poetry places importance and legitimacy on "street-theory," or the subject's knowledge that has come about outside of the academy; a crucial aspect of writing oneself along with this knowledge into existence (Bacchetta 265; Hernandez).

The publication of *Talking Home: Heimat aus unserer eigenen Feder* is an important response to the discourse generated by *Farbe bekennen*, as it opened space for queer Afro Germans to offer critique. It exemplifies the transnational aspects of Queer of Color knowledge production as it also focuses on Germany, but was published in Amsterdam by Queers of Color not limited to Germany. Amsterdam is of particular note, having gained a reputation for its racial diversity and positive attitude towards queer people worldwide. *Talking Home* highlights the similarities in Af-

ro-German's situation since *Farbe bekennen*, but includes a greater range of people finding identity in a fractured European history. Both works seek to define wholeness in this context. In publishing this anthology, Olumide Popoola remarks that "We were right here after all … Like so many others, we ourselves had to write the words we so desperately needed to read," echoing the idea that nuanced narratives are important in building collective memory discourse (El-Tayeb 73). Furthermore, its publication aimed to establish connections based on a shared experience of erasure and oppression but is open ended in approach, allowing the positionality of its authors to connect them instead of their various racial and national identities (El-Tayeb 73).

Alternative Knowledge Production

Positionality over identity is utilized by Afro-Germans in their works, prescribing no standard Blackness and, therefore, no ideas of deviance. Although Black people have existed in Germany for centuries, Afro-Germans increased in number following World War II. This is due to the fact that Black American and Black French soldiers, who were occupying what was then West Germany, would have children with White German women (Wright). Guest workers from Ghana and Cameroon would come to search for work around this period, too (Wright 299). This historical tie is seen in the educational and career opportunities these countries share with Germany.

Most of these children would not have connections to their Black heritage, as they were raised primarily by their White mothers or raised within orphanages (El-Tayeb 67; Oguntoye 167). Germany's reluctance to see race due to the ideologies surrounding it following WWII facilitated the lack of racial discourse in the day-to-day lives of Afro-Germans, even though it was strongly felt. This led to the isolation of Afro-German children culturally. This is what makes looking at the Afro-German experience necessary: they are physically situated within the nation, meanwhile the nation fails to recognize them as real citizens (Wright 297).

This reveals the ambiguous space which Afro-Germans occupy in the nation: their existence contradicts the ideal image of the White European by identifying as both Black and German, despite not having strong ties to their Black cultural heritage and by being constantly misrecognized as non-Germans. However, their situation between "a number of different 'identitie's has led them to develop an alternative form of identity" (Campt 111). This is what Campt refers to as "nirgendwo hinzugehören," or belonging nowhere, a distinguishing aspect of Afro-Germanness that allows them to resist both total marginalization and total assimilation (Campt 115).

Whereas other Black diasporic groups have used techniques like "double consciousness" as proposed by W.E.B. DuBois or the idea of "white masks" put forth by Frantz Fanon, Afro-Germans have no white constructed identity to counter because they are not recognized by the

state in any way based on skin color alone (Wright 299; Campt 115). Afro-Germans, therefore, must use autobiography to write themselves into the history of Germany. Furthermore, because Afro-Germans are not monolithic, their intersectional identities provide compound subjectivity, as gender, sexuality, and other identity categories come together to create nuanced experiences. This is revealed in the content of the personal narratives and makes building community strictly based on race or nation useless, as it reproduces heteropatriarchal logics (Wright).

Diaspora introduces the opportunity for dialogue between individuals and groups to occur, prioritizing the sharing of experience over the sharing of knowledge. This creates the space for artistic expression and its subsequent crucial position within the Afro-German movement today. There is no coherent, prescribed German Blackness. Subjecthood, then, should be seen as diasporic because it incorporates these multiple positionalities into the discourse, granting legitimacy to various manifestations of Blackness thus legitimizing each articulation of this experience. This also makes relating to various experiences crucial to community building, especially with other Black diasporic groups. For example, Jasmin Eding, a co-founder of ADEFRA, felt that having access to Black Panther member Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* as well as the German *Farbe bekennen* aided her in emotionally connecting with the experience of Black women and relieving this sense of isolation (Rentel). Another example comes journalist Jana Pareigis, who expressed in her documentary, *Afro-Germany*, that listening to the experiences of other Afro-Germans is personally empowering (34:55–34:05).

Audre Lorde believed that self-definition was a powerful tool for survival, with poetry being a vital means of achieving this (El-Tayeb 28). Especially because writing poetry can be done with limited resources, she saw it as the "medium of the marginalized" (El-Tayeb 28). By appropriating the language of the dominant culture and using it to unmask the racist syntactical elements in the German language, one can create new meaning and new language (El-Tayeb 28). The role of poetry for Afro-Germans is as transnational as they are themselves: it reintroduces the Black tradition of "oral" history while masterfully utilizing a language which violently excludes them from the German state.

Emotionality and Prosumption

Autobiography is crucial to Blackness, as oral tradition is common throughout its diasporic communities. In choosing the words "German/Deutsche" the community visibly acknowledges their German national identity. However, in using "Afro/Black" over the German word "Schwarze," they define themselves with terms used by the Global North and other African diasporic groups, connoting a greater sense of community through displacement. Naming oneself in subversive ways can also look like forming separate groups that focus on positionality and the creation of space, like ADEFRA. Artistic output is a subversive way of naming

oneself, as it lends social capital through the consumption and production of authenticity and storytelling. Storytelling is community based but, like hip hop, can easily transcend into more mainstream media, making these stories and storytelling processes more accessible through their popularity. Thus, naming oneself becomes subversive in Germany due to the fact that the common mediums through which People of Color tell their stories are poetry, film and theatre, music, and the like.

According to Lorde, poetry specifically is a tool of survival because it appropriates language and offers an alternative vocabulary of liberation. It amplifies values that are not favored by Global Northern intellectual tradition: those that are attributed to women and People of Color such as emotion, intuition, collectivity, nonlinearity, and oral history (El-Tayeb 47). Artistic expression is emancipatory because it empowers the marginalized and recognizes them as experts in their own right while exercising reflexivity, or awareness of one's own preconceptions in the creation of data and critiquing academic power structures that exclude them (Simms and Stawarska 12).

May Ayim's poem "borderless and brazen" is a reclamation of the naming process, outright rejecting the identities attributed to the self by anyone else (92). The opening lines "i will be african / even if you want me to be german / and i will be german / even if my blackness does not suit you" become strengthened by echoing this sentiment in the closing lines with "will return / when i want / and if i want / and remain / borderless and brazen" (Ayim 92). Throughout the poem, she connects her Blackness with that of her brothers and sisters by imagining herself and them at a point where freedom begins (Ayim 92). This ability to name oneself is a deeply valued freedom that, according to Ayim, begins the process of exercising one's agency.

> chains of time
> cast Black shadows from
> the lingering past
> to the present situation
>
> chains of time
> change
> the rhythm
> of a generation
>
> chains of time
> interlink Black people's
> stories and destinies
> with a certain destination

let chains of time
be bands of Black regeneration
not the bondage
of devastating humiliation

—Laja, "chains of time"

Modupe Laja uses poetry to describe how time has been employed by the colonizer to oppress Black people. In using the phrase "chains of time," she illustrates bondage, a reference to slavery and a major historical event that connects many people of the Black diaspora. Additionally, she notes how time interlinks "Black people's / stories and destinies / with a certain destination," reminding the reader that the lived-experiences of Black people are various yet connected, and that this connection should not be overlooked (Laja, lines 10–12). Finally, she demands that these chains of time, which have for so long been the source of suffering, should be reappropriated and transformed into the seed from which our collective healing can sprout (Laja, lines 14–16).

Ellen Wiedenroth explains to May Ayim in an interview in *Farbe bekennen* that finding connections within the blossoming Afro-German community allowed her to combat the extremely detrimental sense of isolation she felt in a White society (Oguntoye et. al. 167). She describes how, despite the general lack of community in Germany she felt growing up, she still experienced this isolation even during her travels throughout Northern and Western African countries and even in Hawaii (Oguntoye et. al. 169). This became amplified by the fact that she was often categorized as White in these places due to the fact that she is European, whereas in Germany she was categorized as Black due to her skin color (Oguntoye et. al. 169). Both Wiedenroth and Ayim discuss the similarities of their experiences and longings to connect with their Black fathers and the fears that they have when operating within German society because of their race.

They take an intersectional approach to understanding their situation by noting the ways in which their gender, sexuality, and race come together. For example, Wiedenroth details a romantic relationship she had with a Black man and how her White mother believed that relationship to be doomed to failure based off of her own experience with Wiedenroth's Black American father (Oguntoye et. al. 169). They also discuss how occupying this space of "nirgendwo hinzugehören" affected their mental health, elaborating on their depression and suicide attempts (Oguntoye et. al. 168). This is important for the context of the entire book and Afro-German movement chiefly because this book is foundational and influential. Normalizing conversations around mental health, intersectional identities, and emotionality helps to integrate these topics and uplift these voices that are usually unheard or stigmatized. These ideologies essentially become diffused throughout the movement, further characterizing it as fundamentally transnational.

Queer Afro-German poet and co-editor of the anthology *Talking Home*, Olumide Popoola, weaves the theme of reclamation and the need for space in her poem, "lineage." Popoola juxtaposes images of violence (hidden bombs vs. a lazy, unassuming cat; oozing pus; multiple big bangs) with images of resistance (attempts to clean the source of pus, sand, tug of war in a storm) (Popoola 62). This way, she illustrates both violence and resistance as ongoing, often inconspicuous practices. She uses metaphor to recognize the ways resistance is performed on the front lines and through documentation in order to name them as valuable mechanisms. She places emphasis on the latter by interrupting the structure of the poem for the first time to describe the need to find, reclaim, and document "human evolution" (Popoola 62). In doing so, Popoola lists reclaiming one's history through documentation as one of the paramount methods of resisting erasure and violence. By employing repetition in "there is a violence in the past," a tone of urgency is added to the poem (Popoola 62). The last lines, "defiance / will make it pass / contriving a halt / here," amplifies this tone (Popoola 62). Popoola breaks the structure of the poem again to name resistance as defiance and a final time to locate this act in an ambiguous "here." The imagery of a brittle earth bearing witness to these innumerable, difficult to name acts of violence and sand running through "our" toes reinforces the idea of a collective "here." This should be interpreted as transnational, as Popoola refrains from naming a specific place and chooses to write the poem in English as opposed to German.

during draught
days crumble
between hazy resistance
and forgotten legacies
there is a violence in the past
like an old bomb
rusty and hidden
left unattended
breeding surprise

each cell charged with minute information
carried over in a web of complexities
brighter than the scope of the sun's rays
and more intricate than the formulas
of advanced physics
we can figure it out
but we cannot grasp the connection
truly

each cell remodelled to incidents sustained
multiplying in its own big bang
without witness we change
get born, rearrange
adjust, and straddle
straddle to cover the distance between past and reborn
lies a vast lake of unknown memories
floating uncared for

unhook it, reclaim it
and glue it back together
scrapbook of human evolution

there is violence in the past
it resonates in many octaves
dissolves in skewed overtones
snoozes lazily
like a cat on a fence
in the summer heat
content and unassuming
yet ready to jump
at every move made

repulsive wars cling
on the inside of skin
oozing pus from ulcerated attempts
of resolution
the damage not undone
seeps deeper than structures
we could never name
there is a violence
trapped within

brittle the earth which binds us
like sand it runs through our toes
and vanishes before its course
can be traced
in the vacuum left
the muffled sound distorts
and the earth
echoes with dim exasperation
there is a violence in the past

in the centre
ready to burst
the vibration is almost impossible to withstand
playing tug a war
in a storm
of grand force

defiance
will make it pass
contriving a halt
here

—Popoola, "lineage"

Artists use the inherently emotionally manipulative nature of these mediums to infiltrate White consciousness, a radically subversive act which sustains Afro-German art. Directed by Fatima El-Tayeb and Angelina Maccarone, the comedy *Alles wird gut* chronicles a love story between two Afro-German lesbians. The use of humor in this film is subversive in that it demands "social competence" from the audience: that is, it requires the audience to recognize the various social scripts that guide the behavior of all of the characters (Mukhida 490). By connecting us emotionally to Black protagonists, we celebrate their successes and lament their failures. This distances us from the White supporting characters, as they become the objects of our laughter. In doing so, we both confirm and challenge norms by recognizing them through the ways in which the directors transgress them (Mukhida 493). This allows alternative, non-normative stories to be told and encourages us to create this distance from the White characters, as this distance is necessary to create the farcical tone of a slapstick comedy (Mukhida 494). Finally, weaving real-life racist situations into the scenes, it forces the White audience to reflect on the serious underpinnings of micro-aggressions (Mukhida 501).

The theatre piece *Heimat, bittersüße Heimat*, or "Home, bittersweet Home," was written by Label Noir, an intersectional group of actors, in order to expose the ways in which German society was and continues to be racist by performing micro-aggressions in five acts (Watkins 139). Their performance of racialized and gendered identity reclaims Black feminist thought in the space of the German theatre, sharing the experiences of Afro-Germans with the audience in order to make the discourse both accessible and emotionally charged (Watkins 147). The scenes are minimal and the roles of each character are limited by the number of actors used, emphasizing this sense of alienation (Watkins 142). They choose to perform scenes with which the audience can identify in order to remove the distance that race creates in their lives (Watkins 142). Thus, performing microaggressions causes the White audience to recognize problematic acts as such through the perspective that Label Noir forces upon them.

The commercialization and globalization of hip hop allows marginalized groups to operationalize this genre, disidentify with it, and encode it lyrically with their own messages based on their own experiences. In an interview with Afro-German rapper Samy Deluxe by Jana Pareigis, they discuss the personally transformative effects hip hop had on them in their youth and the inspiration Samy Deluxe derived from Black American hip hop that allowed him to create his own style (Pareigis, 5:41–6:29). Similarly, the German rap group, Advanced Chemistry, cites the Black American origins of hip hop while using it to characterize their experience ("Alte Schule"). In "Fremd in eigenen Land," or "Stranger in one's own country," they articulate Campt's idea of "nirgendwo hinzugehören."

El-Tayeb would agree that the use of hip hop gives a voice to the invisibilized Afro-German community and its usage allows them to decenter dominant paradigms of Blackness by claiming their authenticity (El-Tayeb 48). This is synonymous with William's and Marquez's assertion about how the sequence of producing and consuming content, or prosumption, can be used as a social tool to develop racial and gender identities (Williams and Marquez 1775). Thus, the prosumption of Afro-German work allows various subjectivities to become visualized and accessible, creating room for disidentification and the amplification of Afro-German identities from within the community and into the mainstream.

Afro-German identity formation is influenced by the unique situation of Black people in Germany as well as the affect of Black diasporic, feminist thought from the United States. This connection informs its transnational nature, as the roots of the movement come from Black queer, artistic perspectives. It lends weight to emotionality and encourages relating to occur based on positionality instead of identity. Disidentification is seen throughout the many products of the movement, displacing the idea of a "normative" Blackness and instead emphasizes the need for varied experiences to be articulated. This allows Black subjectivities to bloom together as wildflowers would in a meadow, disparate and abundant, yet still linked through interconnected roots and the act of flourishing.

Stevie Gunter *is a poet and recent graduate from Northern Arizona University. Their experiences abroad are often weaved into their critiques on collective memory discourse, diaspora, and transnational feminism. As a product of the age of information, #blacklivesmatter and meme culture are themes that they investigate and present on as a regular guest lecturer and speaker.*

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Soy Como Las Huacas

Giselle Sanchez Huerta

Artist's Statement

For my collage and poem, I focused on Latin American indigenous connections to land, colonization, and creation, and how that relates to my own process of naming my gender and queerness. In a few Mayan and Andean creation stories, they speak of a balance of spirits (from the below to above, and from the feminine and masculine) that had to be found to create life. Figuring out this balance was a cosmic discovery and process. In these creation stories, the Gods decided to first create all living creatures without a voice. They then decided to create humans, and to turn all existing voiceless creatures into rocks, also known as 'huacas' in spanish. Although las huacas didn't verbalize like humans, they spoke the silent language of balanced spirits for our Mother Earth/Pachamama. To me, las huacas are a symbol of how we find balance, growth, and connect to our ground and our foundation of life. Speaking on Andean creation stories, scholar Luis Alberto Reyes has said, that las huacas, in their feminine spanish, hold a cosmic anteriority, permanence, and are central to our connection with Mother Earth (even above the masculine sky) (89). This really enforces for me, the cosmic nature of creation, balance, and everything las huacas stand for. Las huacas are a symbol of what "just is," the deep unspoken connections that establish what "just is," and how that which now "just is" was figured out through a process.

Indigenous folklore is the only way I can understand myself, my experiences, and my politic of naming. I wanted to touch on in my piece how the politics of naming can sometimes be a politic of colonization—by enforcing certain words and languages onto our identities. Of course, people can reclaim words that feel right to them, however, my politic of naming is not that reality. Colonial politics of naming often other people from their communities, blaming their identities on individual choice, while creating a reality in which their identities are systemically marginalized. Thus "naming" can allow systems to put blame on individual choice and not recognize systems that influence and take away from our every move. In my piece, I wanted to challenge this singularity that sometimes comes with the politics of naming in an anti-colonial way. I felt it important to decenter myself and show this decentering as a practice of my own gender identity and my indigeneity. By playing with capitalization, I show how the language of the Earth speaks more to me than the english language. I wanted to center aspects of Creation and Nature (Earth, Stars) and decenter the 'i' which is capitalized in english. Being queer and trans and indigenous challenges colonial notions of "self"—by understanding

my connections to my identity as connections to something larger, and by dismantling systems that individualize and center the "self."

As languages have been taken away from me and new ones imposed, the only constant language I have maintained has been *feeling*. For me, it takes a different language to understand how I feel and how I express myself—the language of las huacas—an unspoken relationship with the Earth and all things existing. My politic of naming involves the same silent and cosmic connection with the land that las huacas maintain. This unspoken-ness reminded me of Dian Million's words in "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History." In this article, Million discusses the lived realities of indigenous women within a colonial state and the importance of felt theory as a framework to understand their experiences. As Million puts it, "What [one] feels are [their] frames and no two of us can 'see' them distinctly the same way; thus, feelings are theory, important projections about what is happening in our lives. They are also culturally mediated knowledges, never solely individual" (61). These knowledges that we feel and know are created in non-individual ways. These are not realities that need to be vocalized or explained, because their realities are felt. I have learned that what we do not say is just as important as what we are able to communicate, especially as we look at and create different forms of language that speak to our complicated experiences under racialized patriarchy and gender. Silence is a revolutionary alternative to word—entrusting in my experiences and giving power to that which is not named. Perhaps naming *is* the politic of colonization. As felt theory explains that identity and experiences can exist through cultural mediation, I know my identity is informed and shaped by my cultural practices and connections to land—much like las huacas.

Million quotes Betty Louise Bell in her piece, saying, "'As far back as I remember, I belonged to a secret society of Indian women meeting around a kitchen table in a conspiracy to bring the past into the present… They heard, and they taught me to hear, the truth in the things not said. They listened, and they taught me to listen, in the space between the words'" (64). My ancestors continue to teach me how to hear and find the truths in the unheard as I discover myself—the same cosmic discovery of creation and what cosmic creations lie in me. Growing to understand gender as it relates to my experiences involves immense silence and listening to the inbetweens of what I have been told. This process continues to feel like the gift of my people bringing the past to the present.

I've wondered for a while if there is a word for Gender as a Process. I feel the balance that is my gender, like the story of Creation, is full of processes that are not stagnant. Gender itself does not conform to my being, in the same way that I cannot conform to the language given to me to express my gender. I know the land is my heart, I know I grow from this land, I know who I am is growing. While we all have ways of reclaiming language, I feel this process that is my gender is not granted a word, but a feeling. It is not a feeling I necessarily need to vocalize—if anything it is its

silence that speaks volumes to who I am. I name my feeling within myself and the land I am a part of. This vocabulary is enough for me.

Giselle Sanchez Huerta *is a queer and fat Maya mexican femme from New York City. Often sitting in their own thoughts, they like to question what they don't know and help others do the same. They enjoy crafting, songs, and ceremonies of friendship. Please wish them the best in becoming an internet personality one day!*

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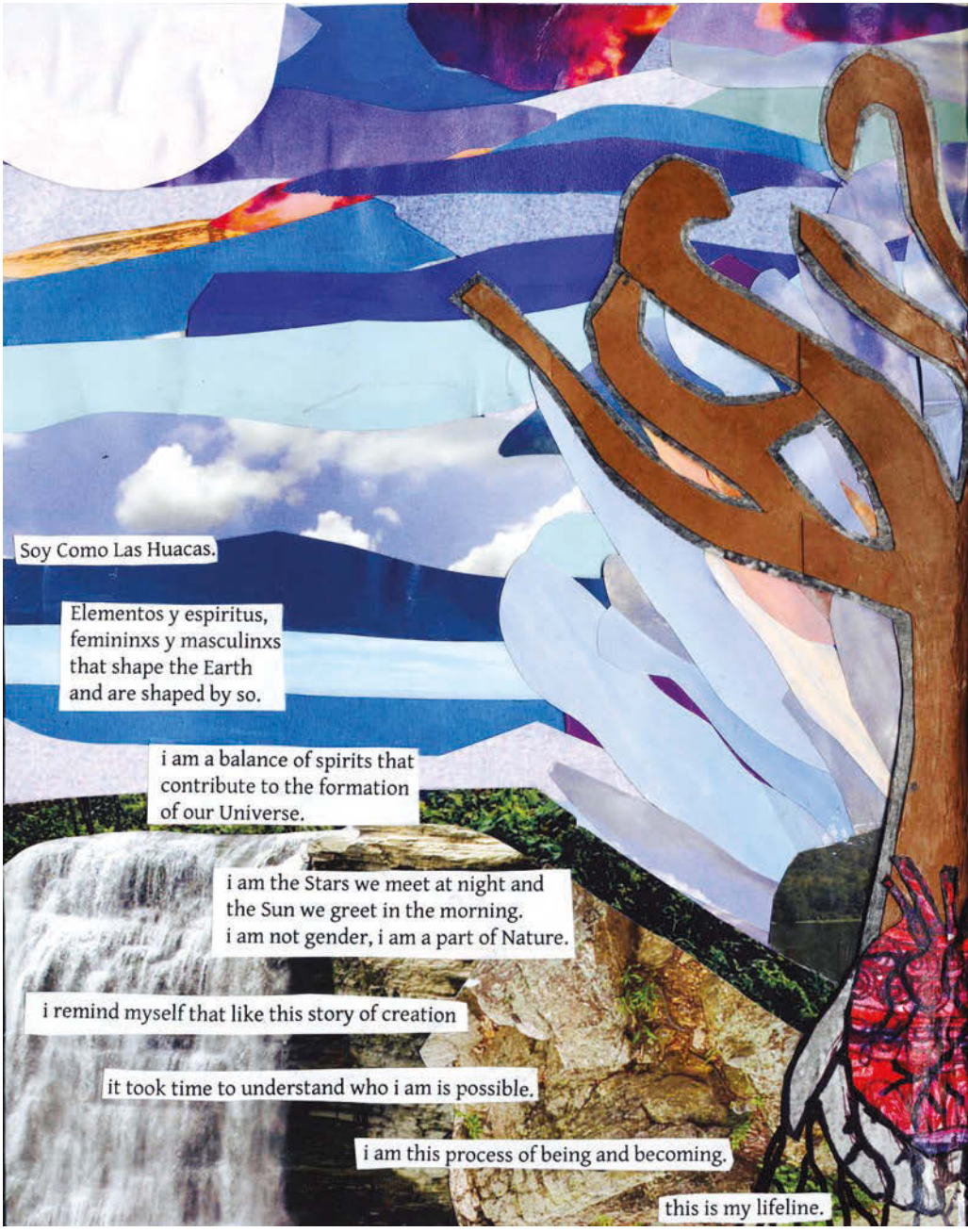
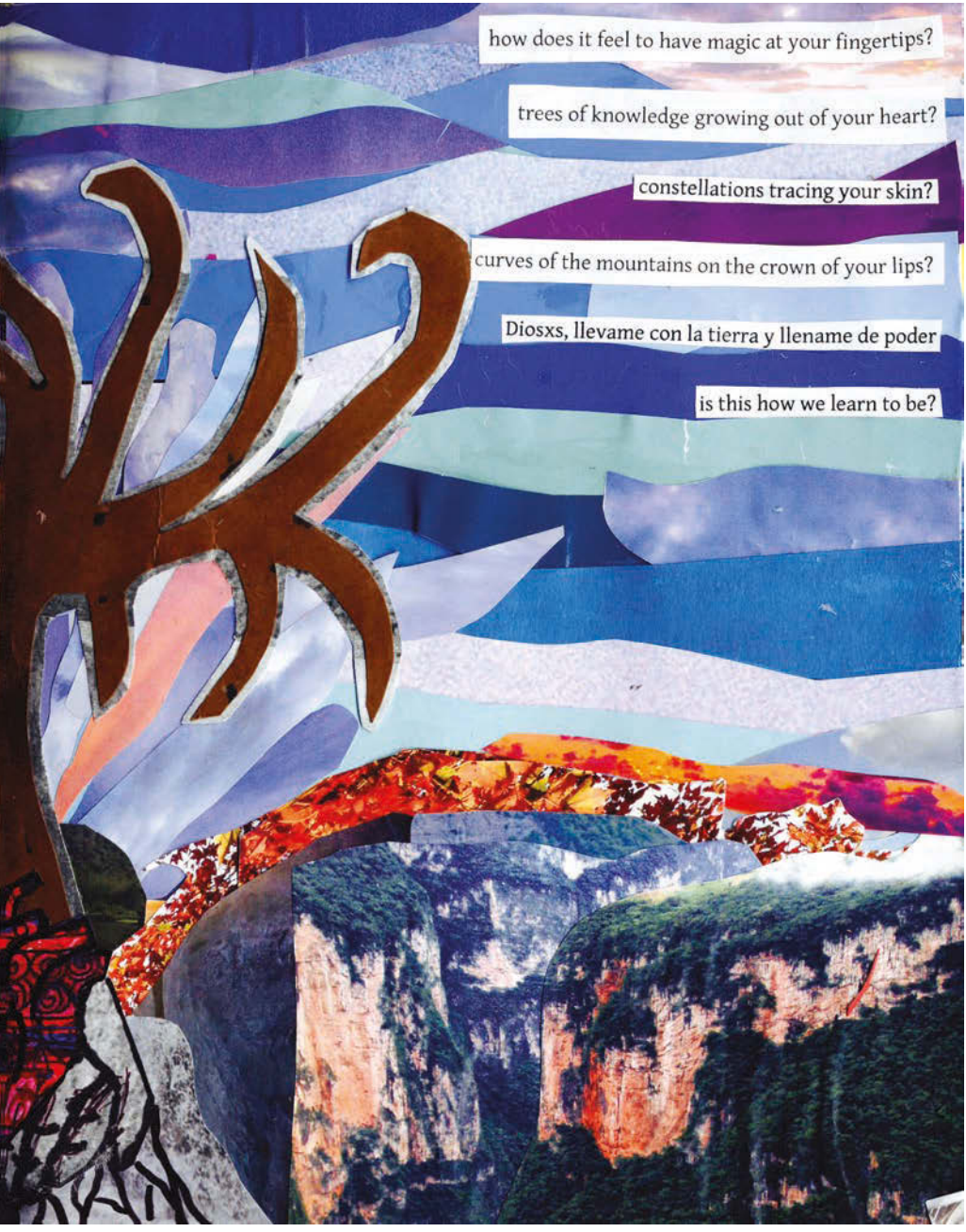

Soy Como Las Huacas.
Elementos y espiritus,
femininxs y masculinxs
that shape the Earth
and are shaped by so.
i am a balance of spirits that
contribute to the formation
of our Universe.
i am the Stars we meet at night and
the Sun we greet in the morning.
i am not gender, i am a part of Nature.
i remind myself that like this story of creation
it took time to understand who i am is possible.
i am this process of being and becoming.
this is my lifeline.


how does it feel to have magic at your fingertips?
trees of knowledge growing out of your heart?
constellations tracing your skin?
curves of the mountains on the crown of your lips?
Diosxs, llevame con la tierra y llename de poder
is this how we learn to be?

Colophon

Book design by Ri Le at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY.
I extend my gratitude to George Laws for his generous design mentorship as well as Dan Lasecki for his guidance and expertise on the arcane craft of handling the printing of books.

The body text is set in 11-point Arno Pro, designed by Robert Slimbach for Adobe in 2007. Titles are set in Trajan Pro, designed by Carol Twombly for Adobe in 1989. Some headings and supplementary information is set in Seravek, designed by Eric Olson for Process Type Foundry in 2007. Finally, URL's are set in IBM Plex Serif, designed by Mike Abbink with Bold Monday for IBM in 2017.